

WHO DARES TO DREAM THE AMERICAN DREAM?



Introduction

In the research about the educational experiences of refugee students, few articles describe how recently-arrived refugee students and their families make their transition to public schools in the U.S. and how they negotiate success in a formal schooling environment. In order to illuminate these processes, I conducted an in-depth study of how Somali Bantu male high school students and their families adapted to U.S. public schools during the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 school years.

Specifically, my research question for the study was “*What are the socio-cultural factors that influence and constrain the success of Somali Bantu male high school students?*” Primary emphases for this research project have been on the contexts of reception for Somali Bantu male students at Central City High School¹ and in the local communities into which they have settled, the social networks they use to help them gain information and succeed in school and after school, and how the cultural capital they possess is valued or under-valued by teachers and other service providers in Central City.

It is my hope that this type of research

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will bring greater attention to the needs of recently-arrived refugee students for teachers, administrators with refugee teen-age students in their schools, and for educational policymakers.

Numerous reasons compel me to study this particular ethnic group, including but not limited to the following: the historical repercussions of lower-caste status in Somalia for the Somali Bantu; their lack of experience with formal schooling in their home country; the discrimination they faced from other refugees in refugee camps in Kenya; and their seeming lack of capital (financial, social, and cultural) in navigating the public school system in the U.S.

These obstacles suggest that Somali Bantu families and their children will have difficulty adjusting to public schools in the United States and may, as a consequence, not succeed academically. The choice to study Somali Bantu young men in school is also important to me because of the unique stresses placed on these young men to be both successful students in school and wage-earners for their families (C. Suarez-Orozco, 2000; Olsen, 1998), the gendered roles they must undertake as males both in the Somali Bantu community and also in an American public high school (Feliciano & Rumbaut, 2005; Valenzuela Jr., 1999), and the stereotypes they face being Black males, refugees, and part of the underclass in U.S. society (Steele, 1997; Rong & Brown, 2002; Davidson, 1997; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1987, 1991).

Rationale

The relocation of refugees is changing the face of the United States and placing unique challenges on its educational system (Portes, 2002; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002). The numbers of refugee students enrolled in public schools is growing apace, the academic backgrounds of these students are becoming increasingly diverse, and the funds with which to support special programs are becoming scarce (Portes & Rumbault, 2001; Suarez-Orozco, 2000; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Meanwhile, the teacher workforce continues to be predominantly White, middle-class, monolingual, and female (Zeichner, Melnick, & Gomez, 1996; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Teacher educators in schools and colleges of education mirror these same characteristics. This increasing diversity in the range and type of refugee students and the lack of diversity in teachers and teacher educators is contributing to an ever-increasing divide between what students need in schools and what schools can currently provide (Goodwin, 2002; Igoa, 1995; Rong & Preisille, 1998; Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2001; Schoorman, 2001; Suarez-Orozco, 2000; Wallace, 2000).

As waves of children from different refugee groups throughout the world continue to move to the United States, the educational task facing public school teachers in schools in which these children enroll proves to be a daunting one. Indeed,

THE SUCCESS OF SOMALI BANTU MALE STUDENTS AT AN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL



Kevin Roxas

upon arrival in the U.S., refugee students have difficulty adjusting to public schools because of various factors, including emotional trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (Sinclair, 2001; C. Suarez-Orozco, 2000; Volkan, 1993; Westernmeyer & Wahmanholm, 1996), difficulty with learning the English language (Cummins, 1995; Guerrero, 2004; Olsen, 2000; Valdes, 1998), and the ambivalent context of their reception by their local community, school, teaching, staff, and fellow students (Gitlin, Buendia, Crosland, & Doumbia, 2003; Lee, 2005, 1996; Lucas, 1996).

Even though the official discourse of most school policies and teacher talk in U.S. public schools is to welcome refugees, many schools lack necessary English as a Second Language (ESL) programs or teachers (Gitlin et al., 2003), hold low expectations of their refugee students (M. Suarez-Orozco, 1989; Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton, 1990), and fail to include refugee parents in the educational process at school events or parent-teacher meetings.

The problems that refugee students and their families face in U.S. public schools often result in experiences of isolation and rejection, lower achievement scores on standardized tests, higher drop-out rates, and antisocial behavior and rejection by peers (French & Conrad, 2001; Kirova, 2001; Rong & Preissle, 1998).

History of the Bantu in Somalia

The Somali Bantus are descended from six African tribes originally living in regions in what are now known as Tanzania, Mozambique, and Malawi. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Arab slave traders armed with muskets and whips plundered these regions, captured untold numbers of Bantu men, women, and children to be sold in Zanzibar's great slave market for eventual enslavement in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. As they escaped or were freed during these centuries, many Bantu attempted to return to Tanzania.

However, the harsh environment of southern Somalia prevented them from returning to their ancestral land. Many settled in the Juba River Valley of Somalia where they were able to live as subsistence farmers. During the era of Italian colonization (1890-1941), slavery was technically abolished but the plight of the former slaves did not greatly improve and they were forced to work on plantations owned by the Italian colonial administration (Van Lehman & Eno, 2003).

Under the British occupation of Somalia from 1941-1951, conditions improved slightly for the Bantu. However, when Somalia gained independence in 1960, life became more difficult. The Somali Bantu continued to be the victims of overt discrimination in housing, education, and employment. Many were forcibly conscripted into the military and sent to

fight Somalia's war with Ethiopia. Civil War in Somalia in the early 1990s created a situation in which Bantus, previously despised by Somalia's primarily nomadic clans, were robbed, raped, bullied, and chased into exile in neighboring Kenya.

The impact of slavery on the Somali Bantu has been devastating. Even after slavery was abolished, the Somali Bantu continued to be treated as second-class citizens in Somalia. Cultural, linguistic, and physical differences set the Bantu apart from ethnic Somalis. There was no co-mingling or intermarriage between the two groups. The Bantu were discouraged from sending their children to school, denied land rights, and denied political representation. They were restricted to the most menial jobs and were often taunted and ridiculed by ethnic Somalis (Besteman, 1999; Cassanelli & Besteman, 1996).

The system of discrimination was even perpetuated in the refugee camps they re-settled to in Dabaab, Kenya. The Somali Bantu were ostracized and forced to live on the peripheries of refugee camps, the least protected areas of these camps, where robbery, rape, and murder were part of their daily existence. Many of these Somali Bantu have spent most of the last decade in these refugee camps awaiting resettlement (Princeton Refugee Initiative, 2005; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2002).

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the years

of subjugation and fear in Somalia have adversely affected the sense of equality and self-esteem for many Somali Bantu. Many witnessed friends and relatives being killed in Somalia. The prevalence of violence and the constant threat of attack in the refugee camps have further eroded the Bantu's sense of security and well-being. The IOM reports trauma-related problems, including hopelessness and depression, among the Bantu being interviewed for resettlement (International Organization for Migration, 2002).

Although access to formal schooling was limited in Somalia, primary and secondary education was made available to all refugees in the Kenyan camps. Schools in these camps were generally under-funded and access to educational materials and resources inadequate. Bantu children were taught according to the Kenyan national educational system, where English is used as the medium of instruction in the primary school. Many school-age Somali Bantu children have attained some English reading, writing, and speaking skills, especially the boys. However, education for girls is not as high as a priority.

The IOM estimates that approximately 5% of the adult Bantu refugees (mostly male) are proficient in English. Although many Bantu children have learned to speak some English, the Somali Bantu as a general population have remained largely illiterate (International Organization for Migration, 2002; Van Lehman & Eno, 2003).

Situating the Study

In the spring of 2003, the United States began to admit the first of 13,000 Somali Bantu refugees. Beginning in the spring of 2005, non-profit social service organizations in the Central City area, including Catholic Refugee Services and Lutheran Social Services, have organized the resettlement of approximately 350 Bantu refugees into the local community.

According to local social service providers and Somali Bantu community leaders, approximately 130 Somali Bantu students are enrolled in the Central City Public School District. There are approximately 15 Somali Bantu students in high school, 20 in middle school, and about 100 in various elementary schools throughout Central City.

The 15 Somali Bantu high school students have faced numerous difficulties in adjusting to Central City High School including a lack of experience and proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking English, unfamiliarity with the expectations of their teachers, and a lack of resources both at

home and in the local community. The potential for low academic achievement and motivational levels of Somali Bantu male high school students is an ongoing and pressing concern for local social service providers and Somali Bantu community leaders.

The research for this study has been conducted in Central City, a medium-sized city in the Midwest of the United States, which has a diverse population in terms of socio-economic background and ethnicity. Due to its access to entry-level industrial and service jobs, low cost of housing, and historical experience with and services for refugee populations, Central City yearly receives large numbers of refugees.

Over the last twenty-five years, Central City has received more than 13,000 refugees from all over the world. This school district was chosen for study in this project because its high rates of refugee and immigrant student enrollment mirror similar enrollment trends in other cities with similar demographic indicators.

Despite the large number of refugee families and school-aged children in the area, teachers from the Central City School District have reported to me in my previous research (Roxas, 2006) that they do not know how to best meet the needs of refugee children. Teachers explain how difficult it is to teach students with varying degrees of English proficiency who sometimes are placed in their classrooms with little or no advance warning and when they are given very little information about the child's previous educational experience and background. In addition, teachers struggle to find the best ways to teach refugee children who often have had limited or interrupted experiences with formal schooling while at the same time teaching native English speakers in the same classroom. Finally, these teachers report that they have received little in-service training or support from their school and school district in meeting the special needs of these children.

Somali Bantu families have been placed in lower-cost housing near the downtown area of Central City. Because of their low English proficiency skills in reading, writing, and speaking, many of the children have been placed in English Language Learner programs in their neighborhood elementary schools, in their neighborhood middle schools, and at Central City High School.

Because of the existence of its Newcomer Welcome Center, Central City High School currently attracts and busses in refugee students who would otherwise attend schools closer to their

neighborhood in Central City. These children are from refugee groups including the Somali Bantu, Somali, Afghani, Liberian, and Iraqi.

Data Collection and Analysis

During the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 school years, I began a qualitative research study that examines the socio-cultural factors that influence and constrain the success of Somali Bantu male high school students. Multiple, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with eight Somali Bantu families who had re-located to the United States from Kenya within the past two years (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Seidman, 1998).

All participants have been identified through the use of snowball sampling (Berg, 1995) in which representatives from Central City social service agencies that provide services to refugee families and teachers in the Central City School District have nominated Somali Bantu families for me to contact. Families have been chosen for this study if they have high school aged male students who attend Central City High School. Part of a larger set of qualitative data gathered over a two-year period, this article focuses on the educational perspectives and resettlement experiences of Somali Bantu male students and their families.

All interviews with students and their families have been audio-taped, transcribed, and followed up with additional interviews or observations in the field. Each interview lasted an average of 80 to 100 minutes. Observations were conducted in the homes of families, at school, and in the neighborhoods in which the participants lived. Ethnographic field notes have been taken during each interview and observation and have been used in the final data analysis.

As the data from the interviews and observations were analyzed, themes were identified through an open coding process in which interviews and observations were analyzed for common themes and patterns in a line-by-line analysis. Coding frames were then constructed to organize the data and identify findings (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These findings were recorded frequently in the form of analytic and integrative memos, and used subsequently to write the findings section of this paper (Emerson et al., 1995).

Through a series of semi-structured interviews with Somali Bantu students and their parents, I examined the role and importance of both formal and informal education to Somali Bantu families and

communities, the successes and problems that Somali Bantu male students and their families have had in schools in Somalia, in Kenya, and in the United States, and other aspects of education in U.S. public schools that Somali Bantu students and their families still do not understand well and need more information about.

Through these interviews, I examined why and how these families left Somalia and tried to chronicle their years in refugee camps, their transition to the U.S., and their current lives in Central City. A more complete understanding of the context of the lives of Somali Bantu students and families outside of school has helped me to better understand their stance towards and experience with U.S. public schools.

Social and Cultural Capital

This study is situated within the theoretical frameworks of social and cultural capital and will attempt to link these theories to research on refugee children. During the process of data analysis, specific attention has been given to the ways in which Somali Bantu male student participants built social connections with each other and local actors to support them in their lives in both local public schools and in the local community (Coleman, 1988). By analyzing the social relationships that Somali Bantu families construct within their own communities and at school, I hope to illuminate the ways in which these families improved their children's access to educational opportunities and school resources.

In this research project, I also explore the forms of cultural capital Somali Bantu families and the male students in these families possess and the problems they face in trying to understand and gain access to the cultural capital that is valued in U.S. public schools (Bourdieu, 1973; Giroux, 1983).

Bourdieu (1973) writes that

An educational system which puts into practice an implicit pedagogic action, requiring initial familiarity with the dominant culture, and which proceeds by imperceptible familiarization, offers information and training which can be received and acquired only by subjects endowed with the system of predispositions that is the condition for the success of the transmission and of the inculcation of the culture. By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced

by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture.

Bourdieu suggests here that students have a greater chance at success in school if they have an "initial familiarity with the dominant culture" and possess a "linguistic and cultural competence" that can only "be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture."

When thinking about the experiences of refugee students such as the Somali Bantu, the familiarity with the dominant culture Bourdieu writes about is limited. Many refugee children have very limited experience with the "dominant culture" in the U.S. and their parents too lack the "relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture."

It is my contention in this article that, while there are sometimes connections between the cultural capital possessed by the Somali Bantu people and the cultural capital valued by the teachers and other educational professionals they face, there are also major gaps between the cultural capital possessed by the families and children at home and the expectations of the teachers in school.

A lack of knowledge about the Somali Bantu people and their history can lead teachers to confuse the lack of experience the Somali Bantu have had with the English language, formal schooling, and U.S. public education in particular with a lack of intelligence or ability to learn. This lack of fit between their previous experiences in education and the requirements of their new schools in the U.S. can lead teachers to undervalue the courage, tenacity, and resourcefulness the Somali Bantu have had to show in their lives. If few people in schools are able to bridge that gap and understand what the Somali Bantu can bring to school communities and if schools continue to make, as Bourdieu puts it, "demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give," there will be depressed hopes and aspirations in the promise of public education for Somali Bantu families and their children.

By examining the social capital and cultural capital of the Somali Bantu, I hope to identify the various socio-cultural factors that influence and constrain the success of Somali Bantu male high school students. My analysis will be "grounded" in the data I collect from the field including the interviews, observations in the field, and the "actions, interactions and social processes" of the participants in the study (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1998).

Findings

The Multiple Roles of Children in Somali Bantu Families

In my interviews with Somali Bantu parents and their children, I found many of the older children serving as tutors and surrogate parents for the other younger children in their families and as advocates for their parents in interactions with social service agencies, schools, and the workplace. Because many adults in the community speak little English and have had limited experience with formal schooling, parents report that they entrust their children to translate at parent-teacher meetings for them and sometimes ask their older children to make decisions for them about the education of the other children in the family.

Parents report too that they often rely upon the income of the children in paying the bills and rent for the family household, because older children in these families have often had an easier time finding entry-level factory jobs in the community than their parents. These roles force the older children in Somali Bantu families to take on major responsibilities within their families at a young age and to become "more adult" than their age might imply.

While other young adults of similar ages are contemplating which college to attend and where to possibly go on spring break, some of the Somali Bantu young adults in this study have had to either postpone their attendance at college or balance both college and work in order to continue to contribute to the household income of their family. In some cases, these children are the primary wage earners for families and, hence, a lifeline for economic survival.

Therefore, my findings confirm earlier research that documents how children of immigrant and refugee families assist their parents and their siblings in their transition to life in the United States in multiple ways and the tremendous pressures that exist for these children in their daily lives on a familial, social and economic level (Olsen, 1988; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). The cumulative effect of these added stresses on these children in their early adulthood affects their schoolwork, their interactions with their peers, and their interactions with their parents (Feliciano & Rumbaut, 2005; Sluzki, 1979).

The Coping and Networking Strategies Employed by Somali Bantu Families

Another emerging theme from my data analysis is the creative coping and

networking strategies used by some Somali Bantu parents and caregivers to improve their children's access to educational support. Although their inexperience with both the English language and formal schooling might suggest that Somali Bantu adults would be totally disconnected from their children's teachers and the assignments at school, some parents and caregivers talked at length about a number of ways that they try and help their children at school.

Sheikh Gudle, an older brother placed in charge of the education of four of his younger siblings, talks about how he calls the teachers at his siblings' schools once a month to ask the teachers how his siblings are doing in their classes. He states:

Often, you know, I call the teachers to check on Muslima and the other children. I ask the teachers how my brothers and sisters are doing. I ask them like that and they tell me, she's good, or he needs help. I have to tell the teachers to take care of all of my brothers and sisters, because they are not like American students, you know, so if they can help them, that's good for me.

Another participant, Haji Hussein, because his job requirements and his own attendance at a local community college make it difficult for him to always be at home to help his children with their schoolwork, has actively tried to find tutors and tutoring centers for his children in the local community.

Other parents in the community talked about checking homework even though they can't necessarily read English and the importance of trying to go back to school, if at all possible, so that they can help their children with their homework as it becomes progressively more difficult.

In their interviews, many of the parents and children reflect on the importance of education in their new host country. Haji comments that "education is very important in the world. If you don't know English or have an education, that's not going to help you in your future. Education in the U.S. can help you learn something and help you become successful here."

Although they are not always able to participate in the education of their children in more traditional ways of parental participation (e.g., serving as a homeroom parent, volunteering on class field trips) (Lopez, 2001), the creative coping and networking strategies referred to by some of the Somali Bantu parents and caregivers in this study suggest that these refugee parents are indeed contributing to the education of their children in important ways.

By building and strengthening net-

works with teachers at schools and tutors in the local community, Somali Bantu parents are trying to provide their children with educational resources and information that they themselves do not currently possess. These weak ties to others with more experience with education will hopefully provides these Somali Bantu children with the academic, social, and material resources needed to succeed in schools (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1973; Lopez, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001, 2003).

The Need To Overcome Tremendous Gaps in Academic Content and Experience with Schools

Despite the fact that refugee children assist their parents in making sense of schools and that some parents and other caregivers engage in creative networking to assist their children, there are many difficulties that Somali Bantu parents, caregivers, and their children continue to face in Central City public schools. Similar to other refugee populations, one of the most pressing problems facing these families is the tremendous gaps that many refugee children have in their academic content knowledge (Hones & Cha, 1999; Sinclair, 2001).

Many of the Somali Bantu children in this study have had limited experience with formal schooling institutions. In Somalia, because of racial discrimination, Somali Bantu children were not encouraged to go to school and were often unable to go to school because they were financially unable to pay school fees. If children were able to attend school, their formal schooling experience was interrupted by the outbreak of war in Somalia, their family's flight from Somalia to Kenya, and movement between refugee camps within Kenya (Besteman, 1999; International Organization for Migration, 2002). Additionally, although many Somali Bantu children do speak some English, their proficiency in English is mostly conversational rather than academic (Cummins, 1995; Guerrero, 2004).

Therefore, most of the Somali Bantu children in this study have faced tremendous academic challenges in the local public schools because they struggle with their English comprehension skills including reading, writing, and speaking and have sizable gaps in their academic content knowledge. Haji Hussein, one of the Somali Bantu parents in the study, captures quite well the problems faced by Somali Bantu children in U.S. public schools because of missing gaps in their educational experience:

Yeah, our children are so far behind because of the language barrier, they cannot understand well what the teachers say to them, what they are taught. They cannot grasp very well the meaning of the subjects. When they read, they don't understand actually or properly what they are reading. That is why they are behind.

They missed so much school in Somalia and Kenya. I mean, they don't have a good basic education. They missed school, that is why. When they were in the camps, they were just going to schools, say not well-prepared, and they started going to school too late in life. They didn't start school early enough in Kenya and were always too old for their grade.

Parents in this study report that these educational gaps sometimes become exacerbated by the context of their reception in the local public schools. For example, parents report that Somali Bantu children have had limited contact with English as a Second Language support in the Central City Public Schools. Typically Somali Bantu children have been provided one to two classes of ESL support in their first year and even less support in their second year of school.

One boy in the study, Hassan Gudle, explained that, although he had limited experience with the English language, he was placed in mainstream classes in his first year at Central City High School and, as a result, struggled throughout the entire year. It was not until his second year that counselors recognized his misplacement and he was placed in the ESL program. Currently in his third year at Central City High School, Hassan is doing better because of the additional support he has been provided through the ESL program, but still is academically behind his classmates.

Another way in which the gaps in their academic knowledge become exacerbated is by their placement with age-group peers rather than with ability-group peers. At Central City High School, the policy appears to be one of social promotion for students in the school. When they are first re-settled to the Central City area, school counselors ask refugee students how old they are. Refugee students are then placed in an "age-appropriate" grade even though they may not have had prerequisite academic experience in the course subject matter.

For example, children who are 15 to 16 are placed in the sophomore track of courses, even though they may not have had any exposure to American Literature or U.S. History, two of the main courses for that grade level. Therefore, the gaps in academic knowledge that Somali Bantu

students bring with them to school appear to be unaddressed in any formal instructional planning or course scheduling by the school and the prospects for the diminishment of these gaps are not likely to improve (Gitlin, Buendia, Crosland, & Doumbia, 2003; Suarez-Orozco & Qin, 2004).

The Previous Experience of Somali Bantu Families with Formal Schooling Matters

As I analyze my interviews with Somali Bantu parents, caregivers, and their children, two main paths of educational adaptation seem to be unfolding for Somali Bantu families and their children. If Somali Bantu parents already have some type of education in Somalia and Kenya (e.g., the families of Sheikh Gudle and Haji Hussein), then they are more likely to know how to help their child educationally and to advocate for additional support and higher education.

In these families, considerable effort has been made for the adult parents and caregivers in the house to try and attend Central City Community College. Attendance at this community college means that the adults in the family can improve their English skills and that these language skills will hopefully translate into increased opportunities for better jobs, more education, and a better understanding of the academic content that the children in the family are being taught in schools. Haji Hussein, a full time employee and part time student at Central City Community College clearly sees the value of education when he remarks:

More education will help the Somali Bantu because the world today is a world of communication and a world of knowledge so when the Somali Bantu become educated they can communicate very well with the other communities in the U.S. They can take and play their roles, as expected by society and the other communities, in employment where education is necessary. So education can help the Somali Bantu in many ways not to mention those few that I think matter.

Conversely, if Somali Bantu parents have less experience with education, then they are less likely to know how to negotiate the U.S. public school environment, less comfortable with going to school and talking to teachers, and less likely to know how to even begin to help their child with their schoolwork.

In this case, families struggle to know where to even start to help their children or who to ask for help in the school or in the local community. Shangora Mkoma, the father of 2 high school aged boys, ex-

presses great concern for the education of his children when he states:

These boys, because the school actually is in English, they don't even understand what the teacher is saying. When they come home, they cannot tell you anything about their day. They are very, very behind the U.S. citizen students. They are struggling with their studies and they don't know how to do their homeworks because hardly they could understand the instructions. They don't know even where to go to find a help so they can do well in their homeworks and their assignments given by their teachers. I don't know who to turn to for help.

These divergent paths suggest that academic success for Somali Bantu students is highly contingent on their parents' and other caregivers' previous experience with formal schools, knowledge of what kinds of knowledge are valued in U.S. public schools, and the ability to build networks with others in the community who can help with access to educational resources and academic support (Bourdieu, 1973; Coleman, 1988).

Discussion

Continuities and Discontinuities: The Fit between Refugee Families and Schools

Viewed from the outside, the Somali Bantu community may be seen as having limited access to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to succeed in the U.S. They have had a history of being denied access to schools in Somalia and limited access to schools in refugee camps in Kenya. Although many Bantu children have learned to speak some English, the Somali Bantu, as a general population, have remained largely illiterate and very few of the adult Bantu refugees are proficient in English (International Organization for Migration, 2002; Van Lehman & Eno, 2003). This lack of experience with formal education coupled with reported trauma-related problems, including hopelessness and depression, suggest that Somali Bantu children may experience low academic achievement and low motivation for formal schooling in the U.S.

However, in this study, both students and their parents report how they are trying to, in their own unique ways, bridge the gap between home and school and to provide resources for their families that they otherwise would not have access to. Older children in these families are taking on "more adult" roles in order to translate for their parents, care for the younger children in the family, and act as economic

and social lifelines between the home and school community.

Another way that parents, older children, and other caregivers in these families attempt to gain access to resources in the community is through building strategic relationships with other refugee families and social service providers in the Central City area. Because many of the adult Somali Bantu community know their own limitations in terms of English proficiency and knowledge of the way U.S. public schools work, they are actively reaching out to tutors at local area homework help centers, community volunteers, and to other Somali Bantu families to piece together a social support network that allows their children access to community resources, tutoring support, and valuable information about how U.S. public schools function.

Moreover, parents, older children, and other caregivers are trying, as much as they are able, to improve their own English comprehension and general academic skills to keep up with their children. These findings suggest hope for some optimism as Somali Bantu students continue their education in the U.S. at secondary and, hopefully, post-secondary levels.

Despite these initial positive findings, there is also cause for concern for Somali Bantu school-aged children. Because of poverty, discrimination, and persistent movement, many Somali Bantu children have had their schooling interrupted for extended periods of time. Some children in the study did not attend formal schools for over five years or attended school sporadically over the course of their childhood.

Upon resettlement to the U.S., these same students have then been placed in grades in public schools based on their age, rather than their academic achievement. These gaps in their academic experience do not appear to be formally addressed by their teachers, administrators, and their counselors or by school policies and programs; instead each individual student is expected to study hard on their own and, as Haji Hussein puts it, "catch up as much as they can."

Somali Bantu students and caregivers report that they are trying hard to understand the academic subjects they are being taught, but find it difficult to keep pace with their American-born peers because of a lack of experience with both the subject matter in each class and the academic level of English required to understand both class textbooks and class discussions.

These gaps in academic experience and experience with subject matter appear to be exacerbated by a family's experience

with school. While some Somali Bantu families have parents, older siblings and other caregivers who have had some experience with formal schooling in Somali and Kenya, other families have no one in their family who has attended formal school for an extended period of time.

Thus, while some families can understand the basic “architecture” of how a U.S. public school functions and how to access help from teachers or tutors at a school, other families do not even know that they are even welcome in the building at Central City High School. In a classic tale of the “rich get richer,” Somali Bantu families who have had experience with formal education appear to be finding more ways to help their children succeed in school and those families with little experience with formal education appear to have little contact with teachers at school or members of the social service community who could, in theory, help them.

Significance of Research on Somali Bantu Refugee Students

It is my hope that my focused, in-depth study of the socio-cultural factors that influence and constrain the educational experience of Somali Bantu male high school students and their families calls greater attention to the needs of recently arrived refugee students for teachers, administrators, and for educational policymakers with refugee teen-age students in their schools.

A description of the difficult and complex circumstances under which Somali Bantu young men and their families lived in Somalia, refugee camps in Kenya, and now in Central City hopefully provides teachers, teacher educators, and school officials a contextual framework for understanding the potential difficulties that Somali Bantu students typically face in their transition to formalized schooling in the U.S.

Note

¹ All place and school names are pseudonyms. Over the last twenty-five years, Central City has received more than 13,000 refugees from all over the world. Central City Public Schools enrolled 17,616 students in the 2003 school year. Data from the 2000 census revealed that students living in the city of Central City are 52% White, 29% Black, and 14% Hispanic, and 5% other races (NCES, 2004).

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