RMLE Online
Research in Middle Level Education

Micki M. Caskey, Ph.D., Editor
Portland State University
Portland, Oregon

2010 • Volume 33 • Number 9 ISSN 1940-4476

"I Feel Like I'm Safe Again:" A Discussion of Middle Grades Organizational Structures from the Perspective of Immigrant Youth and Their Teachers

Kathleen Brinegar
University of Vermont
Burlington, VT

Abstract

As the number of immigrants and refugees grows in the United States, the linguistic and cultural diversity that comprises the middle grades classroom continues to increase. Given the need for resources and specific attention to linguistic and cultural strategies for these populations, this three-year ethnographic study examined the schooling experiences of young adolescent immigrant and refugee students in a small town located in a rural state. Historically a homogeneous area, in the last decade this community became a multilingual/multicultural setting. This study documented the schooling experiences of participants using ethnographic methods including participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. The data describe how immigrant and refugee students internalized middle grades organizational structures such as teaming and multiage grouping. The findings suggest much variability among the students' experiences. Implications for researchers center on expanding the current research base in middle grades practice to include a new set of voices, while implications for practitioners focus on creating a safe environment in which immigrants can express themselves and feel comfortable asking for the level of support needed.

Introduction

Our population is diversifying much more than we are acknowledging in middle school literature. … Schools will experience increased diversity in language, religion, ethnicity, and even economic resources … there is a need to consider middle school organization and pedagogy through multicultural perspectives. (Chamberlain, 2003, p. 10)

The population of young adolescents, 10- to 15-year-olds, entering the nation's middle schools continues to grow more diverse. One subpopulation that adds to this diversity is made up of immigrant children. More than a decade ago, Landale and Oropesa (1995) claimed

that "first and second generation immigrant children are the most rapidly growing segment of the U.S. child population" (cited by Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 3). Immigrant families in the United States have increased seven times faster than native born families since 1990 (Delgado, Jones, & Rohani, 2005) and, as of the year 2000, there were 2.8 million foreign-born United States residents under the age of 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). However, little research centered on the schooling experiences of immigrant youth exists.

The majority of discussion and research devoted to immigration has been related to adult immigrants and the impact of immigration on the U.S. economy and foreign policy (Gaytan, Carhill, & Suarez-Orozco, 2007; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). While Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco acknowledged that much debate has ensued regarding bilingual education, they stressed that, beyond this issue, little is being studied about the schooling experiences of immigrant students. They claimed that this is problematic given that, "The future of American society and the economy will be intimately related to the adaptations of the children of today's immigrants, even in the unlikely case of a drastic reduction of immigration in the coming decades" (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, p. 3).

Beyond even the larger implications tied to economics and politics, as a movement that has been focusing on the education of all students before No Child Left Behind made it a national agenda, middle grades researchers have a responsibility to the students themselves. Our research needs to be expanded to include the perspective of these newcomers. Chamberlain (2003) noted the lack of middle grades literature related to diverse populations. Brown (2005) also critiqued middle grades literature by noting the hegemony of a movement centered on a white, middle class, male perception of identity. Growing numbers of middle grades educators must continue to support students as they experience the nuances of early adolescence. As these young adolescents navigate the nuances of a new culture, it is particularly important to examine current practices from diverse perspectives (Chamberlain, 2003; Igoa, 1995). As Igoa, in her seminal study on immigrant children stated, "Immigrant children are more than 'language minority' children. They are children who have been uprooted from their own cultural environment and who need to be guided not to fling themselves overboard in their encounter with a new culture—for some, a 'powerful' culture…" (p. 9). To guide students in the way Igoa described, it is necessary to understand more about the experiences of immigrant students in our nation's middle schools.

Given such critiques, the research presented here uses the perspectives of both immigrant students and their teachers to answer two questions related to middle grades organizational structures: 1. What are the experiences of a group of immigrant young adolescents and their teachers with the middle level organizational structures, such as teaming and multiage grouping, that exist in their school? 2. Do students and teachers perceive that organizational structures serve to accomplish for immigrant students their intended purpose—to provide a positive schooling experience, devoted to democratic principles, and taking the unique needs of its students into consideration? Answering these questions holds promise in accomplishing what Chamberlain (2003) described as the purpose of multicultural education, "… It does not prop up students to make them successful within an existing system; it analyzes the existing system and advocates change" (p. 12).

Theoretical Framework

For [immigrant] children, the quality of their schools will ease or complicate the[ir] transition (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 85).

Two bodies of literature formed the foundation for this article's focus. The first is an examination of research that highlights areas of impact on the schooling of immigrant youth—transitioning challenges, language proficiency, and school cultural norms. The second highlights the benefits of two middle grades organizational practices—teaming and multiage grouping. The literature in these two areas was examined through a lens based on theory elaborated by Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Oroczo (2001) related to immigrant identity development and theory by Valencia (1997) that critiqued and focused on refuting "cultural deficit" models of education.

According to Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001), healthy ethnic identity development for immigrants involves the creation of a transcultural identity, one that gives individuals the ability to operate within more than one cultural code. For middle schools to promote this type of bicultural identity development, "cultural deficit" (Valencia, 1997) and "cultural difference" (Bhabha, 1995; Gonzalez, 2005; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992) models of understanding need to be negated by critically examining students' educational environments. Valencia explained that deficit thinking describes minority students in terms of their perceived shortcomings, which include language deficiency or low intelligence levels. Thus, the behavior of the individual is modified to "fit"

what is acceptable. Such a model inevitably leads to the goal of assimilation. Examining culture through a lens of "cultural difference" is also problematic, in that it serves to divide and categorize people (Gupta & Ferguson). Such understandings of culture ignore an examination of the relations of power that exist as part of the schooling culture (Levinson & Holland, 1996) for many immigrant and refugee students.

Schooling of Immigrant Youth

In the social services literature related to immigrant youth, researchers discuss a variety of needs that often make transitioning to a new school unique for immigrant students. While it is important to describe this literature, acknowledging its importance in beginning to draw attention to the unique experiences of immigrant students, this researcher cannot ignore its tendency to be subtractive in nature. Within the literature, immigrants were generally described as having something to overcome—an attitude which serves to uphold the dominant power structure. This is in contrast to the belief that schools have the responsibility to change and adapt to their students, not the other way around.

In summarizing this literature, Fong (2007) distinguished between three different types of immigrant groups and the challenges individuals in each were most likely to face. She described the first group—documented immigrant youth—as confronting four common problems: identity crisis, peer pressure, parental conflict, and the questioning of one's self-worth. Racism, prejudice, and discrimination were cited as making relationship building a particular challenge for youth. In addition to the above struggles, the second group—undocumented immigrant youth—were depicted as having the added stress of overcoming the feeling of invisibility. "Speaking freely, exploring new environments, and experiencing different friendships and relationships" (Fong, p. 4) are a few of the things these youth often have to forfeit. The final group—refugee youth—had the greatest risk of suffering from multiple traumas, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as a result of the circumstances forcing them to leave home.

Many immigrant students were also described as lacking proficiency with the English language. In their analysis of interview data of more than 100 immigrant youth, Gaytan, Carhill, and Suarez-Orozco (2007) found that only seven percent demonstrated academic English proficiency equivalent to their native peers after being in the United States for seven years. Beyond how this affects a student's academic performance, the social and emotional implications this has for immigrant students are often not considered. Igoa (1995) stressed how struggles with a new language made it hard for her immigrant students to make friends. This is particularly hard on young adolescents, who are beginning to identify more with their peers than with their families (Erikson, 2005; Stevenson, 2002). Igoa also discussed how sad it was for students who felt like they were being forced to "leave their old language behind" (p. 89). At a time when one's identity is often already fragile, immigrant students are forced to thrust aside something that has been with them since infancy—their ability to communicate with others.

"Beyond the obvious linguistic and curricular differences, children must learn to navigate in classrooms that are dominated by different cultural styles" (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 148). Igoa (1995) discussed how such differences often caused immigrant students to experience culture shock upon entering their new schools. Among other things, this culture shock often led to shyness. Igoa described the extreme shyness of her immigrant students, citing it as a reason for their loneliness. She explained how this loneliness was accompanied by a need to be understood by one's peers and teachers. According to Igoa, friendly gestures and affirmation from peers and teachers went a long way toward helping her immigrant students overcome this shyness and feel like they were part of a community.

Igoa (1995) discussed the importance of providing a "safe nest" for her immigrant students. This nesting place, called "The Center," was a safe haven for the students she worked with separate from their regular classrooms. It provided a place where immigrant students could be open and make mistakes without being ridiculed and be different without worrying about what others thought of them. She described how, because of this, students did not feel as much shame or reluctance to speak while in the Center.

Without this safe environment, Igoa (1995) explained that her idea of "dialogic intervention" that "addresses the feelings of the [immigrant] child through the development of a close relationship and continuous dialogue between the child and the teacher" (p. 117) could not happen. She described how children and young adolescents' thinking is often concrete and literal, preventing them from recognizing the multiple ways of seeing things. Dialogic intervention meant the students needed to be comfortable enough with their teachers to open up and "act as an intermediary between the child's thinking and reality" (p. 117). In serving this role, Igoa created a culture with her students that allowed them to

see themselves in a positive light. This was contrary to the way many felt in their regular classroom when they compared themselves to their peers.

Middle Grades Organizational Practices

Teaming is an organizational practice that involves dividing students into smaller units, each served by a particular group of teachers. The purpose of teaming is to create a smaller learning community for students, which promotes strong, positive relationships among the adults and young adolescents on a team (George & Alexander, 2003; George & Lounsbury, 2000). While teams tend to be composed of four teachers, one representing each of the four core content areas and 80 or more students, some research points to the benefits of smaller partner teams (see Bishop & Allen-Malley, 2004; Bishop & Stevenson, 2000). Mertens, Flowers, and Mulhall (2001) said, "Teaming makes smaller schools better and larger schools smaller" (p. 55). As teaming helps both students and teachers avoid feeling overwhelmed and impersonal in a larger middle school, the belief is that it provides a strong framework in which middle grades students can thrive. Teaming offers students an opportunity to feel like part of a smaller community. According to Jackson and Davis (2000), this feeling of community is critical for this particular age group because relationships form the backbone of a young adolescent's education. They described how a young adolescent's need for close relationships and desire to belong to a group compared with that of an infant. Just as an infant relies on the nurturing of parents and other caregivers to develop cognitive, emotional, and social skills at a time that is critical to their growth, so too do young adolescents. Besides infancy, young adolescents grow and develop at a faster rate than any other period in human development. Therefore, providing an environment that allows young adolescents to form close personal ties with their peers and adults gives them an enhanced capacity for learning.

In various studies, schools that adopted an effective teaming model, with characteristics such as high levels of communication, a shared vision, and common time to collaborate, had positive results in student performance (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000a). Students had consistently higher achievement scores regardless of school size, were consistently better adjusted, and had fewer behavioral issues (Felner et al, 1997; Mertens et al, 2000). In an examination by Flowers, Mertens, and Mulhall (2000b) of the Michigan Middle Start schools, schools with teaming exhibited an improved work climate, more frequent contact with parents, increased teacher job satisfaction, along with higher levels of student achievement. These results confirmed that effective teaming does have a strong impact on overall student development.

In addition to teaming, some middle schools practice multiage grouping, which was defined by George and Lounsbury (2000) as

> an organizational strategy in which students of different ages, ability levels, and interests are intentionally placed together on the same team. Students remain with the team of students and teachers for three years, beginning and ending their middle school careers on the same team. (p. 21)

According to Mason and Stimpson (1996), only five percent of students in the United States were schooled in multiage classrooms, and the great majority of these were in elementary schools. These low numbers were cited for the lack of research on the effectiveness of this practice (Daniel, 2007). However, research has illuminated benefits to multiage grouping, which centers on student emotional and social growth. Veenman (1995) described how multiage classrooms led to increased feelings of belonging and confidence for students because they had the opportunity to develop friendships with a diverse group of peers. These feelings were heightened in both young and older students. Younger ones had the opportunity to emulate their older peers, while the older students tended to take on a leadership role in the classroom (French, Waas, Stright, & Baker, 1986; Pratt, 1986). Although research related to multiage grouping seems to be inconclusive, current research does suggest either positive or neutral results for students (Hoffman, 2003).

A Potential Safe Space for Immigrant Students

Research has demonstrated that teaming cultivated close student-to-student and student-to-teacher relationships that helped students to feel they were part of a community while working to develop their own personal identity. Given this, teaming has potential for providing immigrant and refugee young adolescents with the safe space necessary for feeling comfortable with who they are and receiving the supports they need. Igoa (1995) developed a safe space outside the traditional classroom, and middle grades research suggests that organizational structures have the potential to help ease the transition from that ELL safe space into the mainstream classroom.

Igoa (1995) described how the development of her students could not be rushed, that they needed to first feel safe before they would express themselves. She stressed that many immigrants went through a silent stage and needed to be nurtured out of it. Switching them from class to class slowed this process. In a multiyear

setting, yearly transitions are eliminated for immigrant students, preventing them from having to forge new relationships with teachers and peers repeatedly. In addition to the long-term relationships built through multiyear teaming, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001), described how, for immigrant youth, "classrooms suited for children their age may not meet their learning needs" (p. 128). In a multiage setting, the opportunity for immigrant students to be placed in a developmentally appropriate environment that has native English speaking students increases.

Thus, the literature related to the middle grades organizational structures of multiyear/multiage teaming showed promise in providing a developmentally responsive safe space in which young adolescent immigrant and refugee students could thrive.

Methodology

Using Ethnographic Methods

Ethnography is the study of culture. It is a holistic approach to understanding the lives of the individuals being studied through an examination of the ways in which they interact with one another and their environment. Its focus is identifying patterns within social settings and understanding interactions and environments from the perspectives of those being studied (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993; Patton, 2002; Taylor, 1993; Weiss et al., 1998). What often separates ethnographic observations from those of other methodologies is the length of time the researcher spends in the field. This study spanned three school years, beginning when the youngest participants were in sixth grade and ending in their eighth grade year. The three-year period allowed the researcher to see how this one group of students perceived their schooling as they matured, chronologically and developmentally. It also provided data to describe whether these students saw their experiences with teachers and students as changing over time.

Selection and Description of Research Site

All proper names are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of participants. Riverview Middle School is a small urban school in a northeastern state, serving students in grades six through eight. Riverview Middle School's student population of approximately 200 students reflects much diversity. About 16% of the district's student body is English language learners (three times the amount of any other district in the state), with 16 nationalities and 20 languages represented in the district. The low cost of living in Riverview compared to its neighboring communities and its designation as a refugee resettlement community were responsible for attracting to the city immigrant and refugee populations from all over the world. The majority of the school's immigrant and refugee students were refugees who fled their homelands and resettled in Riverview with assistance from the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI).

In addition, roughly 35% of the district's students transferred in and out each year. The immigrant and refugee population in Riverview was transient in a variety of ways. First, the countries of origin of the students came in waves depending on where the United States was accepting people from at given times. Riverview's original immigrant population included students from Vietnam, then Bosnia. The next wave brought a variety of people from Africa including students from the Congo, Sudan, and Somalia. This population was also transient, in that students entered and exited at various times throughout the school year, with some staying for only a matter of months while others settled into the community for years. Only a small number of the immigrant and refugee students' families were able to buy homes in the Riverview area.

Riverview Middle School's Organization

Structurally and philosophically, Riverview Middle School was based on a middle school model developed by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) and *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Students were divided evenly among three general education teams as sixth graders and remained on their respective teams through grade 8. A smaller fourth team served the school's student population that for a range of reasons was not successful on the other teams. The three regular education teams each consisted of three teachers and approximately 45 students. The alternative team had two teachers and about 15 students. Each team had daily and weekly common planning time and set its own schedule. The teams also had a cluster of rooms within a common middle school hallway, except for the alternative team, whose one classroom was located around the corner from the other teams. The teachers on the teams generally shared common philosophies.

Description of Participants

One hundred percent of the school's approximately 20 faculty members agreed to allow general observations of their classrooms. In addition, the researcher used a maximum variation sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) for selecting 14 students to interview formally and shadow for a full day. Of the 14 students, 9 were males and 5 were females. In terms of country of origin, three were from Somalia, one from the Congo, six were Bosnian, and four were Vietnamese. The length of time they had

been in the United States varied, with one year being the shortest amount of time and 10 years the longest. The one characteristic they all shared was their eligibility for English language learner (ELL) services, although the amount and type of service also varied. All school personnel who volunteered were formally interviewed, including eight classroom teachers, the ELL teacher, a special educator, and the school principal.

Data Collection

Firsthand, long-term participant observations allowed the researcher to see the behavior of participants outside an interview situation. Observations occurred two to four days a week during the school day for the three-year period. In addition, attendance at periodic after-school functions including potluck dinners, school plays, and athletic events provided another lens with which to observe the participants. Observations occurred in the ELL classroom for the first few months as the researcher got to know the students in a smaller environment. Observations then moved into their regular education classes including art and band as well as lunch. Finally, they ended with a full shadow day of the eight participants who still attended Riverview Middle School.

The first set of interview protocols for both teachers and students listed the topics and potential probes to spur the students' thinking. The questions were open-ended, leaving room for participants to share whatever they personally found significant or insignificant with regard to school. As the data collection drew to a close, a second set of formal interviews was conducted with the students. These interviews were often more reflective in nature. The researcher asked students to reflect on the past years and think about how things had changed for them with their teachers, peers, and academic life. Students, who had moved onto high school since the beginning of the study, were able to reflect on their entire middle school experience, noting both the positives and negatives.

In addition to these formal interviews, students engaged in conversational interviews throughout the period of data collection. Such interviews were an ongoing occurrence and served to focus both observations and interviews. Data from these interviews were recorded and served a major role in both data analysis and triangulation.

Data Analysis

The data analysis relied on an interactive-reactive approach (Zaharlick, 1992). The researcher kept a reflective log using a hand-held tape recorder to record analytic thoughts as they occurred. Preliminary coding occurred immediately after data were collected. For the observation data, the researcher used a framework based on the work of Green, Harker, and Golden (1986) and used by Taylor (1993), because it viewed teachers' lessons as central to an understanding of classroom life. As data were collected, they were divided into these frames and coded by themes. These themes helped prompt specific interview questions as the research developed. As the purpose of the research was to describe the schooling experiences of the students from their own perspectives, the researcher removed observation data that were irrelevant to student data from the frames, and new frames were developed to support the student data. This collecting and coding process continued until "theoretical saturation" was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glesne, 1999).

Discussion of Findings

Teaming: Benefits for Immigrant and Refugee Students

Throughout the three years in the field, both students and teachers shared numerous thoughts on the benefits of teaming for immigrant and refugee students. All of the students interviewed agreed that there were benefits to being part of a smaller team as opposed to "having to be like a whole school," although many had a hard time explaining exactly why they felt this way. One student shared, "Teams are better instead of so many people. It's confusing when everyone's all together." While most responses from her peers were similar to this one, there were a few responses that helped to shed light on some more specifics. For example, one student attributed the small class size (about 15 students per class) to the teaming structure. He said, "If we didn't have teams, then we'd have big classes, and we'd be messed up." Another student, when asked to elaborate, liked that the structure of the teams confined most of his movement throughout the school day to a small team area, "Yea, it [being on a team] is kind of helpful 'cause you don't have to wander to different places, like high school you have to go from one end of the hall to another, so you waste more time." The sense of wanting things to be as manageable as possible that comes across in the three previous student quotations was consistent throughout the student interviews.

Comments made by students alluded to the importance of consistency, but it was generally the faculty who identified this as a major benefit of teaming for their immigrant and refugee students. One teacher described what she saw as a challenge for this subpopulation, "I imagine just really feeling like they fit in and feeling like they have a grasp on what's going on from day

to day must be a challenge." Another teacher spoke about some students' need to overcome the trauma that multiple moves, often from country to country, had caused them. Providing students with consistency was a major goal for teachers, and the following quote from a faculty member summed up how teaming helped them to accomplish this.

> As far as students, there's a consistency that they see from class to class, so they have sort of a comfort zone and they don't have to worry about what happens when I do this. It's all sort of taken care of so they can focus more on the content and learning.

Students referenced the different rules that were consistent across all of their team teachers. When asked what she thought about teaming, one student replied, "It's helpful, it's well, I think it's a community." Another student described what helped solidify this sense of community, "I like that we all get to work together to decide on the rules, how everything's going to be, the schedule." This sense of ownership was important to students. Some also tried to articulate that teaming involved more than just academics. One boy, described teaming this way, "I think it's good … like, we can have our own team instead of having to be, like, a whole school and just have classes." The idea that schooling was more than just coursework was also important to teachers, who saw relationship building as an important aspect of teaming.

> I think it [teaming] is a good way to make the kids feel at home more or less, and it's a good way to have them get close friends and then, you know, even take those friends to high school. I think it's a good way to build those relationships.

The importance of this focus on relationship building could not be underestimated. One student powerfully reflected on her teaming experience, "Yeah, like, I feel like I'm safe again."

Identity and ritual were two characteristics of teaming that had a strong influence on the immigrant and refugee students in this study by aiding in the community development process. Many of the students interviewed made reference to their team's name and defined its significance. In addition, many referenced specific activities that set their team apart from the others, "Yeah, [Team name] is fun. We get to skip school for an hour to go to Bushin Tai Do, a martial art." Another student spoke of the Friday team meeting, describing how it was a time for students and teachers to talk about their team and current curricular theme. This particular team structured their time so that traditional social studies class was replaced by theme time in which the entire team would undertake an integrated study of a particular topic. Yet another student described the excitement of his eighth grade graduation.

> Well, we had graduation, like, and our team, like, all of the sixth graders, like, made cards for us, … and, like, the teachers gave us presents, the three teachers we had. And another teacher she, like, helps out and stuff, and she took pictures of us.

Graduation was obviously a time of celebration and pride for the students on this team, just as all of the activities described were about building community and a sense of belonging.

"On teams people try harder to help each other and not be strangers." This sentiment was again shared by many of the immigrant and refugee participants, shy and outgoing, male and female students alike. One particularly shy student who was in sixth grade at the time said, "It helps so that you can be a small group, and you learn, and it's easy to ask people for help." This comment was particularly significant, as all of the students interviewed discussed their fear of asking for help. Another student put it this way,

> Yeah, [it helps my schoolwork] because we know, like, what we need to work on, 'cause everyone, like, gets to help out, so we get organized that way so we know, like, what's, like, good for us to learn that day and what we need practice on.

Having a place, particularly in the regular classroom, where immigrant and refugee students felt they could ask for help was important to the students.

Multiyear Teams: Benefits for Immigrant and Refugee Students

Beyond the practice of teaming that many schools use to create a sense of community for students, Riverview Middle School students remained on their teams for their sixth through eighth grade experience[1]. For the majority of the students in the study, this proved to be a wonderful occurrence. As one so eloquently put it,

> In the beginning, like, sixth grade, it was scary at first because I, like, know nobody and stuff; and the work was harder, and I met some new friends and stuff. In seventh grade I got used to it and knew what to expect. I got better grades than my sixth grade year. And eighth grade year was much easier, because we went over, like, a whole bunch of things like seventh and sixth grade, so I knew what was going on. I got better grades.

Students and teachers described two significant reasons that refugee students benefited from remaining with their team for three years: 1. lack of shyness and 2. fewer transitions. Student comments such as "You don't get shy every year" and "Last year she was scary to me [but now she's not]" revealed one of the major advantages of the multiyear teaming structure for immigrant and refugee students at Riverview Middle School. Igoa (1995) described the intense shyness of her immigrant students, and the students in this study shared similar feelings. The overcoming of shyness evolved into feeling comfortable with both peers and teachers. One student described how his grades improved during his seventh grade year because he was more comfortable with one of his teachers: "I got a couple of Ds last year 'cause I was in it last year and didn't really know that much. This year, I don't know, I know most things, and I'm not shy to tell Mr. G anything."

Teachers also spoke highly of the multiyear teaming system. One advantage was that each year brought new sixth graders to the team, meaning that the immigrant and refugee students were never the only new kids trying to learn the ropes. While teachers did not acknowledge that the "new kid" experience was potentially very different for immigrants than their native peers, they did make a point of using shared experience to help students with the transition. In addition, as one teacher stated and others echoed, "A family environment is built over the three years." Such an environment was seen by teachers and students as a place that helped immigrants and refugees flourish, whereas they might not have if they were required to transition to a new environment every year.

Interestingly, the students did not specifically reference fewer transitions as a benefit to multiyear teaming, but school personnel overwhelmingly did. One teacher shared,

> Just the idea that they have a family, a community, that they're part of, hopefully for multiple years; it takes the guesswork out of the beginning of the school year. They don't have to learn new people, new names, new everything on teams—it just sort of picks up where we left off, and you keep on going. It gives them at least a solid structure, a solid foundation where, again, they may not be getting content, but at least they have social interactions, they're making connections, they've got friends that carry over.

While the reference to the lack of content learning was worrisome, this individual pointed out some important benefits of multiyear teaming for his immigrant and refugee students. Other teachers spoke even more directly about the benefits of fewer transitions for ELLs,

> Structure wise I think that having the [multiyear] team is even more important for the ELL. It's fewer transitions, it's developing fewer relationships, but the ones you are developing are much more intense.

This mirrored the perspective of many students who may not have spoken specifically about transitions but recognized the opportunity that multiyear teaming offered them in relationship building. Another teacher shared this advantage for immigrant and refugee students, "It is key having three years to help students to open up. Just having the constant advocate here makes it a safe place. It also builds routines and stability, which is important for these students after big life changes."

Multiage Teams: Benefits for Immigrant and Refugee Students

Riverview Middle School was organized so that sixth through eighth grade students were combined for most classes. When it came to discussing this multiage aspect of Riverview Middle School's teams, the teachers described two benefits for their immigrant and refugee students: 1. shared experiences and 2. erasing of traditional grade lines, while the students all shared one; having a mixture of friends. This statement made by a teacher echoed earlier themes that described the benefits of teaming for immigrants and refugees,

> I actually think that [teams] are good, because when you have a multiage structure, the chances are when a student moves onto whatever team, there will be someone there that at least has experiences being an ELL student, an immigrant. Maybe not the same language, … but there is a student that they could go to ELL with or that they could do things with.

However, this sentiment highlighted a benefit specific to the multiage nature of Riverview's teams—the likelihood that someone from another grade level has had a similar experience to yours. For students, the positive aspect of multiage teaming was linked to this idea. They enjoyed having friends from all different grade levels. "You meet different people. In elementary school you only knew fifth graders better. Now you have friends from sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth grade." Students spoke about how this eased their fears of high school, knowing that they already had friends there waiting for them. They also spoke of how important it was to be in the same classes as students from their native country, even when they were in separate grades. Teachers found it helpful to pair seventh and eighth

grade ELL students with low skills with sixth graders. Teachers found this more productive than either solely pairing them with other ELL students or placing them in groups of students who were working on dissimilar goals. This also afforded the school the opportunity to place high school aged students who were not ready for high school in the middle school. The mixture of ages present in the middle school teams helped to mask this from peers and alleviate some social stigmatization.

Multiyear, Multiage Teaming: Benefits for Teachers

According to Hackmann and colleagues (2002), "Teachers who work together in teams, reflect on the success of each student and adapt instruction as needed to promote student success will truly make a difference in the lives of their students" (p. 45). The faculty members at Riverview Middle School seemed to embrace these same principles. When asked what they thought of teaming, particularly in schooling their immigrant and refugee students, their responses were overwhelmingly positive. Multiple perspectives and progress monitoring were cited as the two major benefits for teachers serving a diverse population of students. One teacher said,

> I like teaming and the multiage aspect of teams, I absolutely do. Teaming is really important because you have the opportunity as adults to speak regularly about students, and, you know, "So-and-so is really struggling here, and, oh, I'm having success doing this." You can bounce ideas off of each other and get ideas that you may not be trying in your classroom.

Another teacher echoed this sentiment:

> You also get three different perspectives on the students from the three different teachers, especially on a high communication team like ours. One teacher may see something about a student that others don't, which is helpful.

This reference to strong communication is important, as the literature describes communication as a feature of successful teaming.

Many teachers spoke generally of this advantage for all young adolescents. One teacher asserted, "For all students it's just better knowing their skills and where they're at." Others gave specific examples that applied to their refugee and immigrant students, such as how multiage teaming aided in language acquisition. These teachers referenced that they were able to see progression over three years and knew when a student was "pretending not to speak English." One teacher offered this powerful example.

> With Tom, for example, you don't have to start over again next year with new teachers. He has a tendency to hide behind not knowing how to read and write, but I have seen him read things and can say, "I know you can do this."

Shortcomings of Riverview's Teaming Structure

Despite the overwhelming support of the middle grades organizational structures implemented at Riverview Middle School by both the immigrant and refugee students and their teachers, observations and interviews illuminated some major shortcomings for immigrants and refugees, which include friendship, repetitiveness, parent involvement, and teacher perceptions. The one complaint shared by all 14 student participants, and the one cited by most, was that the teaming structure at Riverview Middle School separated them from their friends, "The only thing I don't like about it is that some of my friends are on different teams, so I can't be with them, not even during lunch." For this participant, who had been in the United States for more than five years, this was a minor issue, as she had a rather large circle of friends. For newcomers and students who represented a very small minority in the school[2], this was more problematic. When students were the only ones in a class or on a team who were immigrants, spoke a certain language, or looked a certain way, it proved to be socially challenging. The acute loneliness of these students became apparent as the researcher often served as the sole lunch companion for a few of the students in this situation. When asked how they began making friends in school, most students referenced a fellow immigrant student who began talking to them in their native tongue or another refugee student in ELL class—few became friends immediately with native speakers of English.

The data pointed to two main reasons that some immigrant students ended up alone in classes or on a team. The first was the recognition by administrators that some teams were better equipped to work with immigrant and refugee students than others. Thus, a higher concentration of these students was assigned to these teams. While this may have benefited a majority of immigrant students, it proved to be detrimental to the few who were assigned to the remaining teams. The idea that defined the second reason is common to the immigrant experience: to spread diversity around so that the other students get cultured (Adler, Sumida, & Hong,

1995; Nieto, 1999; Tatum, 2003). While, again, this notion comes from positive intentions, it often served to create a subtractive experience for the students in my study.

Although students and teachers generally spoke positively about the multiage aspect of their teams, enough students spoke ill of the practice that their comments are worth reporting here. As with other shared themes, many students made vague remarks such as, "Different grades, seventh, sixth, and eighth. It's all mixed, … and I don't really like it." However, one sixth grader gave this reason for not enjoying the blurred grade lines, "They [seventh and eighth graders] know more than we do, and they, like, have been to all of the field trips we are going to, and that's pretty boring. They're, like, telling us what's going on." This feeling that somehow he was getting shortchanged as a sixth grader could be just as much a result of the lack of variety of experiences on the team as of the structure itself. An eighth grader shared another concern, "I wish it were all eighth graders 'cause the people I'm with, I'm not really friends with them." The assumption seemed to be that if the grade levels were not all mixed, you had more of a chance of being in a class with friends. This may well be the case and would seem to be more of a concern for students who had attended the graded elementary school than the newcomers.

Early on in the study, a school administrator described the philosophy of Riverview Middle School. In doing so, he said this about parent involvement: "Another huge asset to the multiage is the fact that parents develop their relationships with one set of teachers, and they don't have to develop relationships over three different years, so communication is oftentimes enhanced that way." While this administrator was undoubtedly versed in the middle grades literature on developmentally appropriate teaming, he was a bit out of touch with the feelings of his teachers and their immigrant students. Improved parent communication and involvement were not referenced even once as benefits to Riverview's teaming structure, beyond the initial statement in my formal or informal interviews with teachers. When asked specifically about parent involvement, teachers instead expressed concern about the lack of involvement with immigrant parents.

"It depends on how they teach and stuff." This short statement made by a student during an interview encompassed the final and most significant subtheme related to the shortcomings of Riverview Middle School's teaming structure. Teams are ultimately made up of individuals, and the data demonstrated that teachers who were uncomfortable or unprepared to teach a diverse class of learners could create a supportive teaming environment for some students but not all. Inconsistent team policies around push-in versus pull-out classes for ELL students were reflective of the different teams' perspectives on immigrant and refugee learners. One team relied heavily on a push-in model in which the ELL teacher would largely support the classroom teachers in their regular classes. For example, ELL students on this team attended and participated in the mainstream science class. During this time, the ELL teacher was present in the classroom to support them when needed. Students on this team were slowly weaned off heavy ELL classes until they were totally mainstreamed.

The other extreme involved a team in which most ELL students, regardless of length of time in the country or country of origin, were pulled out for core academic classes. During math class, although not pulled out, the ELL students sat removed from everyone else with an instructional assistant. These same students sat in the back of the room instead of participating in advisory time, because their ELL class overlapped with advisory time, and they came in late. Needless to say, this influenced students' ability to socialize and bond with their classmates. One could also call into question the level of academics required of ELLs as they sat in the back of the room. So, while the immigrant student who was considered academically on par with his or her classmates viewed this team as supportive, the two immigrant students who spent their time in the back of the room or in pull-out classes felt quite the opposite.

These observations correlated with those of other teachers in the school. During an interview, one said of the school's organizational structure,

> But then, you know, you go from that organization down to that personal being and, again, I think it depends. There is a range of understanding, levels of acceptance, fear, training of people, you know, some people still believe you need to speak louder [*raises voice*] to someone from [another country]. I don't believe that it's that bad, but I'm just saying that there's that range. Some people have a real understanding, I mean I look at someone like Pam, who grew up in another country. Her level of understanding and depth of knowledge about people from different countries is different than some other teachers who might not have had that experience, and so, you know, again it also goes back to, I believe, having enough support.

This perspective also related to the teachers' number one way of changing the school for immigrant and refugee students if given the opportunity. In one way or another, all teachers spoke of the need for more training around diversity. Many said that if a separate ELL teacher could not be put on every team, then, at the very least, one teacher on each team should be required to take ELL classes so, this individual could serve as a leader for her teammates.

Conclusion

Environment Matters

When asked how they felt about their teachers, student responses varied from, "I think I would tell them everything. I feel like I am safe with them" to "I would tell them nothing … cause I don't feel good sharing with them." The bottom line, as one student shared, is, "If I feel comfortable around my teachers, then I do better." Middle grades schooling has recognized this trait in young adolescents for years, and researchers in the field have undertaken many studies that illuminate organizational structures and practices meant to provide students with a developmentally appropriate place to feel good about themselves and their learning while also being challenged. As demonstrated here, the middle grades structures used at Riverview Middle School showed much potential for improving the schooling experiences for immigrant and refugee young adolescent students. In many ways, the immigrant students at Riverview Middle School felt they were given a voice in their classrooms, saw their individual needs as being addressed, and generally felt positively about their schooling experience.

At the same time, the data also showed that statements such as this one from a teacher at Riverview, "I think our structure … is really, truly best practice. It doesn't matter if the student is an immigrant or not. … I don't think your country of origin makes a difference" need to be reexamined. By not acknowledging the differences of immigrant and refugee students, one renders them invisible. Without a doubt, there were features of Riverview's organizational structure that resulted in negative consequences for its immigrant and refugee students. While multiage teaming, in general, offered many benefits to Riverview's immigrants, these advantages could be strengthened and more widespread if the specific needs of the individuals of this subpopulation of students were better examined and addressed.

Positive Schooling: Democratic Principles and the Unique Needs of Students

Did the organizational structures at Riverview Middle School provide a positive environment for immigrant students devoted to democratic principles and students' unique needs? The data were generally positive but did show mixed results regarding whether the immigrant students at Riverview Middle School felt comfortable with their teachers and peers, had voices in their classrooms, and were protected from the many factors that often make schooling challenging for immigrants.

On the positive side, students described the manageability of the small size of their teams and the consistency they felt in having a set of shared expectations and team rituals for a period of three years. Along those lines, students expressed their excitement in belonging to a group in which they did not just passively exist but also played a part in developing its collective identity. Finally, students shared their pride in their academic growth over the course of multiple years and largely attributed this to having stayed with the same teachers over an extended period of time. In terms of voice, the students were excited that they had the opportunity to participate in the development of team rules and expectations. They also spoke of the importance team meetings had in allowing them to define who their team was and in cooperatively solving their teams' problems. In addition, the teaming structure created an environment in which helpfulness and seeking help were common behaviors. It also served to prevent students from being pigeon-holed by a teacher, as the three team teachers were expected to communicate about the students to promote an educational experience based on the whole child. Finally, the multiage/multiyear structure supported student language acquisition, as growth was easily monitored and pushed by teachers from year to year. In general, students felt a positive sense of self-worth, a critical element of successful schooling in both the literature for young adolescents (Brighton, 2007; Stevenson, 2002) and for immigrant students (Fong, 2007; Igoa, 1995).

However, the unequal and seemingly haphazard distribution of immigrant students across the three general teams proved to silence some students. What was perhaps based on a democratic principle of spreading diversity across the school was actually detrimental. Fong (2007) described the invisibility that immigrant students felt they must overcome, which was the case for Riverview students who were placed on the team with a pull-out ELL program. As these students were largely out of the classroom for academic classes or seated separately in the back of the room, they lacked the

opportunity to participate as equal members on the team. In addition, students who were separated from those who shared their native language were forced to leave this language behind during the school day, silencing a part of their identity (Igoa, 1995) and newcomers' voice entirely. Finally, the organizational structures at Riverview Middle School were not seen as promoting successful family-school partnerships.

Implications for Educators and Policymakers

Immigrant students need a safe space where they can have a voice and learn to advocate for themselves comfortably. To move away from a cultural-deficit paradigm, it would benefit schools to examine organizational structures more critically with input from students. This research revealed that the practice of organizing middle schools into smaller units—teams—helped provide a positive environment for many of the immigrant students in this study. While the experiences of these 14 students cannot be directly transferred to other settings, middle schools in multilingual/multicultural settings owe it to their students to explore organizational structures that recreate the familial atmosphere present for many immigrants at Riverview Middle School. Beyond teaming, advisory is a middle grades practice that supports community building and ideally ensures every student in a school has an adult she can turn to (Jackson & Davis, 2000). This is another organizational structure that has the potential to promote the type of positive school environment my study participants desired.

Even more significant were the benefits described by my participants of the multiyear and multiage elements of the teaming structure at Riverview Middle School. Reducing transitions and maintaining consistency for multiple years, when the environment is positively influencing a student, can be a valuable tool in alleviating immigrant stress and in improving students' perceptions of their academic performance. At the same time, placing immigrant students on teams for multiple years with teachers who are uncomfortable with immigrant students could have detrimental effects on student self-worth.

In addition, schools serving immigrant students should examine their grouping practices closely. The practice of distributing diverse groups of students across teams or classes was perceived by immigrant students as negatively influencing their ability to make friends. While peer relationships are important for the identity formation of all young adolescents, they are critically important for immigrant students. Igoa (1995) articulated seven reasons peers matter: 1. teachers ultimately stay behind, but friends move on with students; 2. friends help ease isolation and fear; 3. they stimulate learning; 4. they stimulate oral language development; 5. they teach reading; 6. friends act as counselors; and 7. they help validate immigrant students. Therefore, schools should make intentional decisions about grouping in relation to immigrants.

Implications for Research

It is imperative to recognize students as stakeholders in educational reform. They need to be invited to participate in the dialogue about the future of their education. The thoughtful comments made by the 14 middle grades students in this study, both formally and informally, demonstrate the ability of young adolescents to offer an important perspective regarding their schooling experiences. Providing immigrant students, in particular, with the opportunity to join the conversation about middle grades education will not only add new voices to the dialogue but also could promote the type of dialogic intervention (Igoa, 1995) that immigrant students often need to view themselves in a positive light.

As an ethnographic study, the data presented here represents the experiences of a single group of individuals. Therefore, more research related to immigrant and refugee middle grades students needs to be undertaken to shed light on some of the issues that surfaced. One topic of inquiry is parent involvement, which was considered a huge weakness at Riverview Middle School. Research into what characteristics of teams lead to improved outcomes for immigrant and refugee young adolescents has the potential to alter subtractive schooling practices. As these students provided anecdotal evidence that multiage teaming led to improved academic achievement over time, quantitative research should explore the validity of this claim with a broader group of participants. Finally, as the data showed, the practice of teaming did not, in and of itself, help to negate the experience of having a teacher unprepared to educate immigrant students. Research into teacher dispositions and young adolescent immigrants also should be carried out. Asking what dispositions are needed to support the development of immigrant young adolescent learners could help to guide such research.

Both my student and teacher participants described a myriad of ways middle grades organizational practices enhanced their schooling experiences. However, they also shared some disconcerting ways the same practices not only failed to meet their unique needs but also felt

subtractive in nature. Given this, it is time for middle grades research to recognize its invisible students and broaden the lens through which middle level structures and practices are examined.

Author Notes

[1] In the three years I spent at Riverview only two refugee students were moved to a different team, and both were moved to the small alternative team.

[2] For example, there were two students in the middle school from the Congo and one from Colombia.

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