

Exploring the Impacts of Race, Culture, and Language on African Refugee Students in Ontario Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Identity threat, or perceived identity threat, in school settings has been linked to decreased academic engagement and performance among minority group members. In particular, among secondary school students, discrimination based on culture, race, and/or language can contribute to drop out rates and a lack of meaningful academic engagement. This paper is part of a larger study which explored the challenges and barriers faced by young adult African refugee students in Ontario high schools. It will focus specifically on the explorations and discussions of race, culture, and language, as found as part of that larger study, looking at how discrimination affected the participants' academic engagement, achievement, and integration into their new schools. Using in-depth interviews, the findings of the study are expressed in the participants' own voices. Participants recounted that instances of both implicit and explicit discrimination and difficulty fitting in with peers created a lack of academic achievement and academic engagement, although these were barriers that all participants were able to overcome with time. They discuss the important roles of school administration and teachers in working to decrease discrimination and build more inclusive classrooms and schools.

Keywords: refugee youth, discrimination, academic achievement, academic engagement

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Introduction

The number of refugees entering Western countries is increasing. Specifically, the number of African refugees has been drastically increasing in western countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United States (Anders, 2012; Dooley, 2009; Kanu, 2008). While estimates tend to differ slightly amongst organizations, Canada typically accepts and resettles between 25,000 and 31,000 refugees each year, with 23,286 being resettled in 2014 (Citizenship & Immigration, 2015). From 2004 to 2013, of the Top 10 Source Countries for refugees to Canada, two were African nations: Nigeria and Zimbabwe (Citizenship & Immigration, 2015). Also, in 2014, of the Top 25 Source Countries, seven countries listed were African nations (Eritrea, Congo, Somalia, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Burundi, and South Sudan), accounting for more than 26% of the total refugees accepted that year (Citizenship & Immigration, 2015). Not only does Canada, and Ontario in particular, take in large numbers of refugees each year, but the number of refugees accepted is expected to increase by 20% each year (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013). These numbers are quite significant and indicate that refugee students are becoming more common in our schools and classrooms. In fact, Simbandumwe (2007) reports that in the province of Manitoba, 69% of recent immigrants from African countries have come as refugees. However, while the numbers of such students are increasing, school programming has not adapted to be able to effectively meet the needs of this group (Cassity & Gow, 2005; DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Keddie, 2012; Naidoo, 2009; Onsando & Billett, 2009; Tangen, 2009).

Refugee students face many challenges that are not commonly experienced by non-refugee students, such as a lack of social capital, a lack of English proficiency, a lack of family and/or community support, and/or backgrounds that include little, no, or interrupted formal educational experiences. However, the literature tends to group immigrants and refugees as one homogenous group (Davies, 2008; Matthews, 2008; Segal & Mayadas, 2005; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012), overlooking certain challenges and leading to refugee students often being underserved by teachers and school systems. Because high school graduation remains an elusive goal for many refugee students (Kanu, 2008; Magro, 2009; Naidoo, 2009), educators and educational administrators need to gain a better understanding of factors that affect the academic achievement and success of refugee students, as well as which supports and methods tend to lead to better academic achievement results.

This study sought to uncover some of the common challenges experienced by African young adult refugee students in their quest for academic success. Because these experiences are shared in the participants' own narratives, it is the hope that teachers, school administrators, and community support services will be able to modify their services to better accommodate these students. Specifically, the following questions were explored:

1. What are some of the common challenges faced by African young adult refugee students in regard to their academic achievement?

2. What can educators and school administrators at the secondary school level do to help these students overcome challenges?

Theoretical Framework

Equity, in general, is the idea, or the quality, of being fair and impartial. In education, the concept of equity represents fairness and impartiality in schooling (Havighurst, 1974; Fiske & Ladd, 2004). In this paper, educational equity is relevant in ensuring that African young adults with refugee status receive equitable and equal treatment in the education system, allowing them to achieve academic success, and later, success and equal opportunities in all aspects of their lives.

Methodology

This study used narrative research design, in an attempt to place importance and emphasis on personal experiences, as well as on collaboration between the researcher and the participants. Researchers in the field discuss narrative research as a collaborative endeavor in which the participants and the researcher interact dynamically to learn and produce purposeful and meaningful stories (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Since narrative research relies upon this collaboration and interaction, both the researcher and participant may ask questions and provide answers in the research process (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). While there are many types of narrative research forms, this study used personal experience stories, which are studies of the experiences of individuals “found in single or multiple episodes, private situations, or communal folklore” (Creswell, 2012, p. 504). Experiences and challenges were discussed with and retold by participants in the interview process, and as such, are presented in this paper in the words of the participant, who is marked by a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Method

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with young adults of African origin who entered Canada with refugee status. Two more responses were received, but these potential participants did not fit the criteria, as they had entered Canada as young children, not as young adults. Interviewing a small number of participants allowed for a greater degree of exploration (Glesne, 2006). All interviews, approximately an hour in length, were conducted face-to-face, and audio-recorded and transcribed to allow for more thorough examination. Since the interviews were semi-structured, an interview guide was created, but participants decided the direction that the discussion ultimately took. Participants were provided with a copy of the interview guide prior to the interview to give them a chance to reflect on their experiences and answers. Due to the nature of the interview and questions, participants were required to be proficient in English.

Findings

Language. The level of English on arrival differed between participants, but two participants frequently named language as one of the largest challenges they faced. For example, Abasi claimed that his level of English on arrival was average, saying:

I could understand and... I was afraid to speak a little bit, but I could clearly understand what people were saying. It's just that I couldn't speak.... I couldn't use my thoughts and then speak up because I was afraid I would say things differently, or I wouldn't say it right, and you know, in high school, and you don't know if somebody's going to laugh at you or whatever, so I was very cautious when it comes to speaking up.

Habimana also self-identified at an intermediate level on arrival, but focused on the difficulty he had in understanding English speakers, specifically with pronunciation and vocabulary:

I wouldn't say it was good English. I would say maybe I was intermediate... African English is totally different from the Canadian English or British English. Back home, we speak in English mixed with, you know, our mother tongue as well. The English which was spoken here in Canada was different. Some words, I couldn't hear them. So communication was a big part of a problem.

Both Abasi and Habimana had backgrounds in English learning before arriving in Canada, although neither spoke English as a mother tongue. While both of them felt somewhat confident in their English skills entering Canada, that confidence seemed to fade as they entered their new high schools and began adapting to their new lives. For instance, when I asked if he found it easy to make new friends, Abasi recounted:

Not in the beginning. Again, the language thing, you know. I wanted to talk, but they talk too fast or too loud.. And I'm like hmmm... you know what I mean, I want it slow, like let's talk slowly. So I was friends with people who were the same. They weren't really that comfortable with English yet.

Similarly, Habimana, said it was not only the English level that made making friends challenging, but also that he did not share the same interests as his peers, which made communication difficult. At the same time, he also said that, "I believe that they taught me big lessons which kept me pushing to go back to school because hanging out with them, really, whatever English I'm speaking today, I believe I got from them." Here, Habimana acknowledges that while difficult, communicating with peers helped him learn conversational and colloquial language that was not taught in the classroom.

Joseph was the one participant who had very few difficulties communicating in English. Initially struck by his level of English proficiency, I inquired further, and learned that he had attended an English secondary school and also self-taught himself

English. Upon arrival in Canada, he was at an advanced level of English proficiency and was never required to take any ESL classes. Because of this, did not speak of language barriers in adapting to his school life and personal life in Canada.

Abasi often spoke of a fear of speaking, especially in the beginning, and how teachers can be an important factor in improving confidence and comfortability when contributing in class:

Maybe the teachers can persuade them a little bit more, maybe once in a while just have conversations with the students after, especially if you feel like they're shy. That they're reserved. And especially if they're new and their English is not that great. Because it could be... you're just shy to speak up. Like I said, you know things, you want to engage, but at the same time you're kind of like, "oh man, I'm not sure," so if you can get teachers to just give just that little bit of spark or confidence, it could be a whole lot different in a way.

Habimana also said that teachers need to be mindful in *how* they encourage new students to speak in the classroom. Some of his classes required participation and teachers often chose students to speak, causing Habimana a lot of stress because his classmates seemed to listen very intently:

My communication wasn't good and when I'm speaking, everybody is paying attention. Maybe that was a good thing... but to me, it was a little bit challenging because it everybody will be, you know, paying attention to me... And sometimes, I used to think, maybe she's [the teacher] picking on me... why doesn't she ask so and so? The student who was sitting in the back?

When I asked more about how his classmates, Habimana responded:

When we are hanging out outside... you hear the kids bringing up the words which I was using in class... Some of them were trying to be funny, yes... I didn't think it was funny.... I thought this guy, you know, they're trying to make me miserable.

Habimana acknowledges that at the time, he thought his classmates were being unfriendly, but in hindsight, they may have been trying to welcome him into their peer group by joking around with him. Inside the classroom, Habimana also spoke of challenges when it came to keeping up in school and improving his English simultaneously. As he came to Canada unaccompanied, Habimana also worked to support himself while in high school, which added to the challenges:

Oh it was a massive workload because I had to spend, you know, besides going to work, I had to spend most of the time on the library, on running grammar and reading... the dictionary, you know, grammar books, and whatever book we were using at school. Cramming them, cramming words. And what words mean. Reading... because remember at that time, I could read a chapter and I could not

understand a thing. So I had to check in a dictionary, you know, every single word in the chapter.

Abasi, on the other hand, discussed difficulties when it came to speaking. He spoke of how he relied on sports, specifically soccer, to help him meet new friends and improve his language:

I started opening up more and then that changed me a little bit, in a way, to be more comfortable. And, from then on, then I started getting, you know, that's when I started meeting new Canadians and stuff, once I started playing soccer with them. I started becoming more comfortable talking to them because you can say something to them after that, right?

Culture. Discussions of culture largely centred on academic culture. All participants spoke of numerous, and significant, differences between their schooling in Ontario and in their home countries, which were sometimes unsettling. However, they seemed to have found the Canadian academic culture much more inviting, positive, and productive. Abasi said that:

The teaching methods there [in Tanzania]... it's like you're a robot basically. They just want to jam things into your head and you don't really study things, you memorize things, which is useless in my opinion. I'm not learning. It's useless to me. Here, it's different. You study things and teachers will tell you, 'Make mark of this because it might be in the test.' Not like a whole book, you study the most important things. And I like that system. It was much better that way, makes it so much easier.

Joseph echoed these thoughts when describing the differences between teaching methods in Rwanda and Canada:

School in Rwanda is more difficult than here I would say, because it's less practical. We took a lot of notes, a lot of writing. But we lacked practical, like we didn't have labs as we did here, so it was really more like they give you a lot of information and you have to go on your own and figure out what information's important to you. While here, everything is practical. Like for example chemistry, we took our chemistry classes in labs. Everything was there. Back home in Rwanda, it was in a classroom, so it was just writing and drawings. We didn't really see the actual apparatus.

The participants also all separately discussed differences in student-teacher relationships and interaction. For example, Habimana said:

In Rwanda, the students will find they don't have any relationship... the teacher, they call them professor in high school, so they're in the high position... there's not any communication besides showing up in class, teach, give you an exam.

That's what I thought when I came to high school [in Canada]. I thought that's what the same things, but I found it's different. They, you know, communicate, you approach them. Tell them whatever you want. Whatever's in your mind.

Joseph also talked about relationships being different than what he was used to in Rwanda, saying:

Back in Rwanda, you fear your teachers. You were afraid of them. Like, you don't say anything unless they ask you ... but here, students are, they're outspoken, you know, they chat with their teachers about anything. You can ask questions and all that. We also could ask questions but we actually feared our teachers because they could, you know, give you spanks and all that stuff. Regardless, even in high school, we could still get spanked, so... [laughing]

Abasi echoed this experience, saying that in Tanzania, the emphasis was on "being on time, grades. So if you're not that smart and you fail all your subjects, your butt is gonna hurt." He claimed that relationships with teachers in Ontario were much friendlier. However, while the participants spoke this way in hindsight, they also discussed how this new student-teacher relationship model was confusing at first, and that they did not approach teachers for help or conversation. This led to some issues when it came to certain assignments and misunderstandings. Perhaps the most poignant was with Habimana, who had never even seen a computer before arriving in Canada. Yet, upon arrival, he was expected to type and submit assignments for his classes. One math teacher even required students to use a special software program to complete assignments. Habimana said:

It was my first time to use a computer. For them [the other students], it was quick. They know whatever is going on. To me, even typing... the teachers in high school, they expect me to hand in typed material, and I don't know how to type. And again, I'm learning how to use a computer and how to turn on a computer.

Like I remember this math class which they... the teacher, she expected us to use computer. I had no clue whatsoever, and she gave me a zero. I solved it on the paper. But she didn't want paper because she didn't know that I'm computer illiterate... and she don't want to know why. She should've asked "Why didn't you use computer?" But she didn't want to know.

This was an extremely telling example of the ways in which Habimana was failed by his school and his teachers, who instead of trying to understand his background, assumed that he had the same knowledge and skills as the other students in the class.

Joseph described a similar lack of resources back home in Rwanda that impacted his schooling here in Canada, though not as significantly as in Habimana's case. For example, Joseph said that chemistry classes were taught in the classroom, whereas in Canada, students have access to labs and materials to better teach chemistry concepts. In addition, Joseph said that they relied mainly on textbooks and rarely had access to a

computer at school. He said, “We went to labs like once a month ‘cause we had to take turns. We barely did experiments. It was like one experiment each month.” While Joseph did not face the same difficulties as Habimana, and specifically did not describe these differences as challenges, these statements show the importance of teachers recognizing the various backgrounds and experiences of students in assigning tasks and especially in using new technologies or methods in the classroom.

Speaking more in terms of Canadian culture, rather than academic culture, Joseph discussed how he found it difficult to relate to peers at first:

When you first get here, because you don’t understand certain things, it’s kind of hard to fit in, so I would say maybe my first week, I was nervous and paranoid. I’m like “How can I possibly relate to these kids?” because their whole life, this is what they know, but me, this is new to me, so... but as time went on, I was getting along with kids. Because we didn’t watch the same TV shows, we didn’t eat the same food, we didn’t dress the same. But then after some time, as time went on, the things start to change.

Race. Habimana attended a school where he was not only the only African student, but the only black student. He recounted that “in my school, there was just so many kids who would show up anywhere I am standing and kids have much interest in me.” He saw this interest in him as a positive thing because he was able to meet his peers. Joseph also had similar experiences that he also described as positive, as it helped him meet new students and make new friends. He said that despite some “ignorant questions here and there,”

They seem to be open, wanting to know more about me and where I come from. Basically wanting to know how it’s like where I come from, so it wasn’t really that hard for me [to meet new people] because most kids were really interested in knowing basically what it’s like where I come from.

While Habimana had positive experiences with classmates, his experiences on the school bus were much more negative. Most students at his school took the bus, and many students had never met him, which seemed to make some students nervous. He remembered that while these students on the bus were not verbally or physically aggressive, they always avoided him:

[They] Just avoid me and they could tell that... ok, it makes sense because I was 20 years old. Those kids were, if they were high school, kids of 17, 18, usually 15, 16... so to see a 20 years old sitting in the bus was kind of strange. And plus he was a black boy who doesn’t speak much English.

Similarly, when asked about the approachability of his peers, Abasi said:

If people were friendly to me, then I would have been friends. But people weren’t. Like, the Canadians, people that could speak English, that were here for a while, they have their own kind of crew, and there was no approaching.

They were just doing their own thing, so basically, you find people that you have common things with, and then you start doing things with them.

This particular statement from Abasi demonstrated that if students have difficulty relating to their new peers, they tend to gravitate towards those most like themselves. In Abasi's case, those most like him at his school were also refugee students, students new to Canada, and/or ESL students. Abasi also mentioned that some teachers also tended to gravitate towards students who were most like them. He found it easier to connect with teachers who were immigrants themselves, many of whom he said still had accents, and said that Canadian teachers "would kind of ignore... like if there was another Canadian, they'd hang out with the Canadian students." Habimana also suggested that perhaps teachers may have been afraid to speak to him about certain things. For example, when talking about the math teacher experience, Habimana said that the teacher should have asked him why he completed the assignment on paper instead of on the computer, but that "it's a sensitive case. Because the other kids... sitting there in the classroom... if she could've come to me asking me a bunch of questions, some people they could see it as a racist or something. It's probably because she didn't want to get involved in sensitive cases."

Discussion & Recommendations

Despite the numerous and varied challenges faced by these participants, they were all able to complete their secondary school education. One aspect that was cited as contributing to their success was support. In all of the interviews, across all topics of discussion, the importance of support in the classroom, and in the school, was a prevalent theme. The experiences and challenges outlined in this paper, with regards to language, culture, and race, could all be mitigated, or at least managed, if there were some level of school-wide support effort. For example, Abasi spoke about a need for mentors from the community who have had similar experiences, as he thought that hearing about the experiences of others would have helped him, especially in gaining confidence in his language use. Abasi said he needed that push and for someone to say, "Listen, don't be afraid that you're going to say something wrong... so just speak up. Don't worry about it and nobody's going to laugh. People will correct you, if anything. And you're going to benefit from that." This recommendation for mentors is something that is strongly supported in the literature. For example, Whiteman (2005) describes the importance of mentorship programs in which veteran students are paired with new students to help them adjust to the new school culture and expectations, as well as build their confidence in their English language skills. Interestingly, this was something that was repeated very closely by Abasi, who talked about how Canadian student mentors would help with the adjustment to Canada, while former refugee students could offer a more personal and understanding mentoring relationship given that they have been through a similar situation.

Joseph actually had access to these peer mentors who had experienced similar backgrounds and had already adapted to life in Canada. These mentors helped him adapt to school, encouraged him to participate extracurricular clubs and activities, and

provided his first friends in Canada. Joseph thought that peer mentors were even better than community mentors, saying:

I think it's better a student because you can relate to them. If they bring you someone older from the community, you won't feel comfortable talking to them about certain things, so someone your age, maybe your gender as well... That would be perfect because you have the same mindset except maybe you might have different backgrounds, but you pretty much are on the same level of, you know, knowledge and all other things... because you can relate to them.

While Abasi's and Joseph's opinions may differ on exactly *who* to have as mentors, the overarching theme was that mentors are extremely important in the adaptation to both school and life in Canada.

A concerted, school-wide effort is also important in supporting African refugee students. This effort was apparent at Joseph's school, and acted as an excellent support system. For example, when Joseph and his brother first arrived in Canada, they relied on social assistance, which meant that they could not afford class trips or school uniforms. To help, these things were paid for by the school, indicating support even at the administrative level. In addition, the school provided the opportunity for Joseph to educate not only his schoolmates and community members about his life experiences, by giving motivational speeches. By encouraging Joseph to educate others, the school was also attempting to educate the community and other schools in the area about the experiences and lives of refugee students. This was an excellent example of a school-wide effort that even expanded into the community.

While the ideal is a school-wide effort, the literature indicates that the onus is placed on one teacher or one principal (Opoku-Dapaah, 1992; Virtue, 2009). This was seen in interviews with Abasi and Habimana. First of all, when I asked Habimana if the school knew his background, and specifically the fact that he had never used a computer before coming to Canada, he said, "Yeah, because that's the reason they put me in grade 11, and they know I couldn't." While the principal was aware of his background since he was responsible for testing, he did not inform Habimana's individual teachers of the situation. Habimana required, and would have benefited strongly from, a school-wide effort in promoting his academic transition and ultimately, his academic success.

Abasi also spoke of the onus being placed on one teacher. He described how as a refugee student, he found it easier to connect with teachers who were immigrants or ESL speakers. To illustrate, Abasi spoke of one male teacher, an immigrant himself, who went out of his way to connect with him. Abasi said that many Canadian teachers would "hang out with the Canadian students," but this particular teacher acted as a strong support system for Abasi, especially with regards to improving his confidence level when speaking English. The lack of support from other teachers was demonstrated when Abasi said that because this one teacher was so influential and helpful to him, he took classes with this teacher simply to be in his class, even though "some classes I really didn't care for." Instead of choosing classes of interest, Abasi

chose classes when he could with the only strong support system that he knew within the school.

A school-wide effort does not only include a concerted effort between teachers and administration, or the provision of peer mentors, but may also include academic help (Davies, 2008; Dooley, 2009; Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011; Naidoo, 2009) and teaching academic skills such as handwriting (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). Joseph's school was the only one of the three participants that did provide additional academic help outside of classroom hours. As for teaching skills, Habimana in particular would have benefitted from additional support in teaching academic writing skills and general computer and typing skills. In addition, Joseph mentioned that cultural orientation classes, perhaps as soon as he arrived, would have been very useful in helping him adjust to life in Canada. While these classes would not be academic in nature, they would be part of a school-wide effort that looks to support refugee students in all aspects of their new lives, in an overall attempt to increase their chances of success at school. As such, the experiences, challenges, and ideas shared here call for the need for teachers and school staff to work together both within the school, and in the community, to best support young adult African refugee students. This school-wide effort should include extra academic support, culturally relevant pedagogy and teaching, professional development for teachers, and the provision of guidance counsellors and/or peer mentors. In addition, this school-wide effort should include diversity and sensitivity training not only for teachers and principals, but also for students. This type of effort would enable students to excel and overcome some of the most common challenges faced by young adult African refugee students. Without a concerted and joint effort from the Ministry of Education, school boards, teachers, and students, African young adult refugee students may not be able to meet their full potential at the secondary school level.

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