

**“We Wanna *Fee*/ Like We Are America”:
Examining the Inclusive and Exclusionary High School
Experiences of New Americans in a Small City**

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ABSTRACT: This transcendental phenomenology centers on the perceptions and experiences of New Americans from Africa and Asia who attended high schools in a smaller urban area located in North Dakota. Using Anderson et al.’s (2014) ecology of inclusive education (EIE), we identify environmental factors that promoted or undermined inclusive education experiences for the New Americans in our study. Themes include: collaborative and welcoming EL teachers, differences between mainstream and EL classes and teachers, problematic experiences with school administrators, valued connections with American peers, and balancing family responsibilities with school. Implications for policy and practice that support the inclusion of New Americans in all schools are provided, including ways to disrupt bias in schools and approaches to providing supports for New Americans and their families.

KEYWORDS: New Americans, North Dakota, high schools, inclusive education, phenomenology

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The relocation of immigrants and refugees, or New Americans, to the United States continues to transform the racial and ethnic landscape of cities and schools across the country. North Dakota, a midwestern and sparsely populated state, is not typically recognized for its diversity. But, like many predominantly white and less densely populated states across the nation, it is becoming more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (Crary & Gilblom, 2021; Gilblom et al., 2020). Over the last decade, North Dakota has become home to over 4,000 refugees, the highest per capita in the nation (Kaleem, 2020). A refugee is an individual who was forced to leave their country due to war, violence, or fear of persecution (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). Moreover, immigrants comprise nearly 5% of the total population, about 36,000 individuals (American Immigration Council, 2020). An immigrant is an individual who voluntarily leaves their country to settle in another (American Immigration Council, 2020). Most New Americans resettle in North Dakota's urban areas, Fargo, Grand Forks, and Bismarck, cities with the largest school districts.

While research exists that examines the experiences of New Americans in schools located in larger cities and states across the country (Bonet, 2018; Mendenhall & Bartlett, 2018; Nwosu & Barnes, 2014), the educational and social experiences of New Americans in smaller cities and states with evolving demographics remains unclear. New Americans' high school experiences are a concern given that New American students experience a higher risk of high school dropout (McBrien, 2005) and have social-integration-related challenges in school settings (Isik-Ercan, 2012). Also, school personnel in smaller districts may be underprepared to adopt policies and practices that promote inclusive educational experiences for New Americans (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2019; Nwosu & Barnes, 2014; Willie et al., 2019). Therefore, it is vital for researchers to investigate the educational experiences of New Americans attending schools in smaller cities.

This transcendental phenomenological study was undertaken to better understand how New Americans experience North Dakota's high schools. The two central questions in this study are: What were New Americans' experiences within North Dakota's high schools? And in what contexts or situations did they experience it? We interviewed eight New Americans, six Africans and two Asians, who attended high schools in an urban area located in North Dakota. Using Anderson et al.'s (2014) ecology of inclusive education (EIE), the researchers uncovered factors that promote or undermine inclusive education environments. Implications for policy and practice that support the inclusion of New Americans in all schools are provided, including ways to support New American students and families and approaches to disrupting bias in classrooms and schools.

Refugees, Immigrants, and the Evolving Landscapes of Small Cities

Since the passage of the Refugee Act in 1980 that created the Federal Refugee Resettlement Program and incorporated the official definition of a refugee into the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), the United States has accepted

more than 3.8 million refugees and asylees (United States Department of State, 2021). The U.S. federal government and non-governmental resettlement agencies have placed refugees in traditional gateway cities, including Chicago, Miami, New York, and Los Angeles (Bose, 2020; Singer et al., 2008; Singer & Wilson, 2006). However, between 1990 and 2000, resettlement patterns of both refugee and immigrants shifted away from major metropolitan cities and towards rural areas and smaller cities (Bose, 2020; Massey, 2008; Singer et al., 2008). Bose (2020) suggests that refugees are resettled in smaller areas because federal, state, and local authorities assert that refugees bring growth to smaller communities with declining populations by opening businesses, joining the workforce, and contributing to state and local taxes. Immigrants from other areas are then drawn to these small cities with ethnic enclaves because assistance is available to newcomers who are seeking jobs and housing or because they share a culture or language (Massey, 2008). In North Dakota, one in 20 residents is an immigrant. Immigrants comprise 13% of the state's production workforce and 13% of the healthcare workforce (American Immigration Council, 2020).

In recent years, North Dakota has led the nation in per capita refugee resettlement. In 2015, before President Donald Trump's administration prohibited travel and refugee settlement from predominantly Muslim countries, North Dakota received 1,001 refugees, the equivalent of 135 refugees per 100,000 state residents (Massey, 2008), while Texas received the largest number of refugees in the U.S., about 13,000, the equivalent of 49 refugees per 100,000 Texas residents (Glass-Moore, 2015). North Dakota's three largest cities, Fargo, Bismarck, and Grand Forks, are primary sites of refugee resettlement. Since 2002, 4,547 refugees were resettled in Fargo, 1,096 in Grand Forks, and 237 in Bismarck (Refugee Processing Center, 2021). While the absolute number of refugees resettled in cities like Fargo is small, the influx of refugees has a significant impact because the population of Fargo is small. In 2019, Fargo, a city with 124,662 persons, had a foreign-born population of 9% of the total population (United States Census Bureau, 2021).

During the 2020-2021 school year, a total of 1,644 English learners (ELs) enrolled in the Fargo, Grand Forks, and Bismarck public school districts combined (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2021). At the time, Fargo Public Schools (2021) reported that the total district EL student population was comprised of 44% refugee students, 11% immigrant students, and 45% students born in the United States.

Defining Inclusive Education

Inclusive education grew from the special education literature and was originally concerned with the education of students with a disability. Today, inclusive education has taken on a broader usage in response to the increasing diversity within school communities, including cultural and linguistic diversity (Boyle & Sharma, 2015; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). No universally accepted definition

of inclusive education exists (Boyle & Anderson, 2020). But, Topping (2012) suggests that inclusion means “celebrating the diversity and supporting the achievement and participation of all pupils who face learning and/or behavior challenges of any kind, in terms of socio-economic circumstances, ethnic origin, cultural heritage, religion, linguistic heritage, gender, sexual preference” (p. 13). Mittler (2000) adds that inclusion means facilitating active involvement and providing support in the classroom for all students.

Creating an Inclusive School Environment for New Americans

Once resettled, New American children begin the challenging process of adjusting to a new educational environment. New Americans often have difficulty navigating new school systems (Ixa Plata-Potter & de Guzman, 2012). Many New American families experience obstacles that influence their school involvement, including lack of comfort with the host country’s language, no transportation, and unfamiliarity with the expectations of the host country’s education system (Garcia Coll et al., 2002). Also, New American children may fear teachers and speaking out in class and many state that teachers “go too fast,” preventing them from learning (Kanu, 2008).

New American students also experience social integration challenges (Dippo et al., 2012; Isik-Ercan, 2012), resulting in a higher risk of high school dropout (McBrien, 2005). Teachers may contribute to New Americans’ poor adjustment to and lack of academic success in American schools. Current research on teacher preparation in rural contexts indicates inadequate emphasis is placed on preparing teachers to understand the complexities of cultural and linguistic diversity represented in their students (Storey, 2000; Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005; Wenger et al. 2012). Roy and Roxas (2011) find that some mainstream teachers blame EL students for their poor academic performance, stating they have low motivation or a poor attitude, rather than accepting responsibility for their professional development needs.

Welcoming school environments that foster a sense of belongingness, safety, positive social norms, and warm supportive relationships are associated with higher levels of self-esteem, student engagement, academic success, and self-confidence (Block et al., 2014; Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2019; Zengaro et al., 2016). Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) find that young refugees who experience a greater sense of school belonging have a lower incidence of depression and a higher sense of self-efficacy. Additionally, culturally relevant teaching that promotes and encourages New American students’ native cultures, personal experiences, and home language use supports student engagement, sense of belonging, academic success (Fruja Amthor & Roxas, 2016; Garcia & Kleyn, 2016; Garcia & Wei, 2014; Mendenhall & Bartlett, 2018; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009), and self-esteem and positive acculturation (Bell et al., 2015; Iizuka et al., 2014). Culturally relevant teaching also affirms immigrant students’ cultural knowledge and experiences in their new learning context (Harushimana & Awokoya, 2011)

and it may decrease school personnel prejudices and reduce bullying and discrimination from peers (Ghosh & Galczynski, 2014; Osler, 2015).

The Ecology of Inclusive Education Framework

Anderson et al.'s (2014) ecology of inclusive education (EIE) was selected as the theoretical framework for this study. Anderson et al. (2014) reconceptualized Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological systems theory (EST) to create the EIE framework. EST is based on the premise that human development cannot be considered independent of context. Therefore, EST contains a hierarchy of settings or systems that surround an individual and contribute directly or indirectly to student learning. Anderson et al. (2014) reworked EST to focus on a learner's school ecosystem to uncover environmental factors that influence inclusivity.

At the center of the EIE framework are the three determinants of inclusive education for the learner: participation, achievement, and value. As noted in Anderson et al. (2014), Booth and Ainscow (2002) define participation as "learning alongside others and collaborating with them in shared learning experiences. It requires active engagement with learning and having a say in how education is experienced" (p. 3). Participation requires that learners be actively involved with their classmates in meaningful learning experiences (Evans, 2012) and that they have the right to voice their opinions and shape the elements of their school experience that affects them (Portela, 2013). Achievement refers to what learners gain as a result of their school learning experiences (Guskey, 2013). Achievement requires that learners have access to a particular curriculum's learning goals that meet their individual needs and that assessment "is offered in meaningful and attainable ways" (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 29). The last determinant is the value of a person, meaning that the school community "value[s learners] for who they are and what they have to offer, to others and to the school itself" (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 29).

Surrounding the learner are four levels of factors that stifle or aid the three determinants. The micro-system exists around the learner and includes all of the individual factors that a learner directly experiences at school, including the curriculum, teachers, peers, resources, classroom culture, and playground (Anderson et al., 2014). The meso-system consists of the interrelations among the individual's different microsystem factors that ultimately affect the learner, such as the relationships between teachers and parents (Anderson et al., 2014). The exo-system includes school-wide practices outside of the learner's immediate environment that influence the learner's experiences, such as school culture, school leadership structure, relationship among the community, parents and staff, and school policies and procedures (Anderson et al., 2014). The outermost system is the macro-system containing the social, political, historical, and global contexts in which a school is situated that ultimately affect the school (Anderson et al.,

2014). The EIE framework is applied in this study to isolate and categorize the numerous aspects of New Americans' school experiences.

Methodology

Since the experiences of New Americans' public high school experiences in smaller cities, including North Dakota, are unknown, the researchers selected a transcendental phenomenological research design. This design reveals an understanding of the eight participants' lived experiences and how they make sense of their experiences; this design challenges the researcher to focus on how participants describe their experiences in relation to the situation in which they find themselves (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). By understanding the perceptions and experiences of an individual, a researcher can begin to understand the influences of the environment on the actions of an individual (Poch, 2005).

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to recruit participants (Creswell, 2013). All participants attended high school in the same area; they were currently 18 years or older and they self-identified as an individual who is an immigrant or a refugee. No participation incentives were offered. The researchers worked closely with school personnel and individuals with connections to New Americans living in the area to recruit participants. Moustakas (1994) suggested that researchers consider using a diverse group of participants with varied ages, ethnic and cultural factors, gender, political and economic factors, races, and religions. Therefore, we collected experiences from a diverse sample of refugees and immigrants from different countries located in Africa and Asia. In total, eight participants were recruited, a sample size within the recommended guidelines for phenomenological studies (Table 1) (Creswell, 2013). More refugees than immigrants volunteered to participate in the study, which may be due to the larger share of refugee enrollment in area high schools. All participants were enrolled in sheltered EL classes before transitioning to mainstream classes with fluent English speakers who are predominantly white, American students.

Table 1

List of Participants with Demographic Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Status	Country of Origin	Country Came from	Age When Arrived
Alizia	21	Female	Refugee	Congo	Uganda Refugee Camp	17
Francois	20	Male	Refugee	Congo	Kenya Refugee Camp	19
Faheem	22	Male	Refugee	Sudan	Egypt	14
Akinyi	19	Female	Refugee	Kenya	Kenya Refugee Camp	7

Nadine	22	Female	Immigrant	Cameroon	Cameroon	22
Mireille	21	Female	Refugee	Congo	Kenya Refugee Camp	16
Reshma	19	Female	Refugee	Nepal	Nepal	13
Khaled	19	Male	Immigrant	Kuwait	Kuwait	14

Interviews

The Semi-structured interviews occurred between November 2020 and December 2020. Each participant was interviewed once for a total of eight interviews. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted and recorded over Zoom. A verbal consent process was used. The Institutional Review Board at North Dakota State University approved study protocols.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researchers and emailed to the participants for member-checking. Participants were encouraged to contact the researchers via email within two weeks to schedule a follow-up interview to clarify statements or add additional information. One participant scheduled a follow-up interview. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

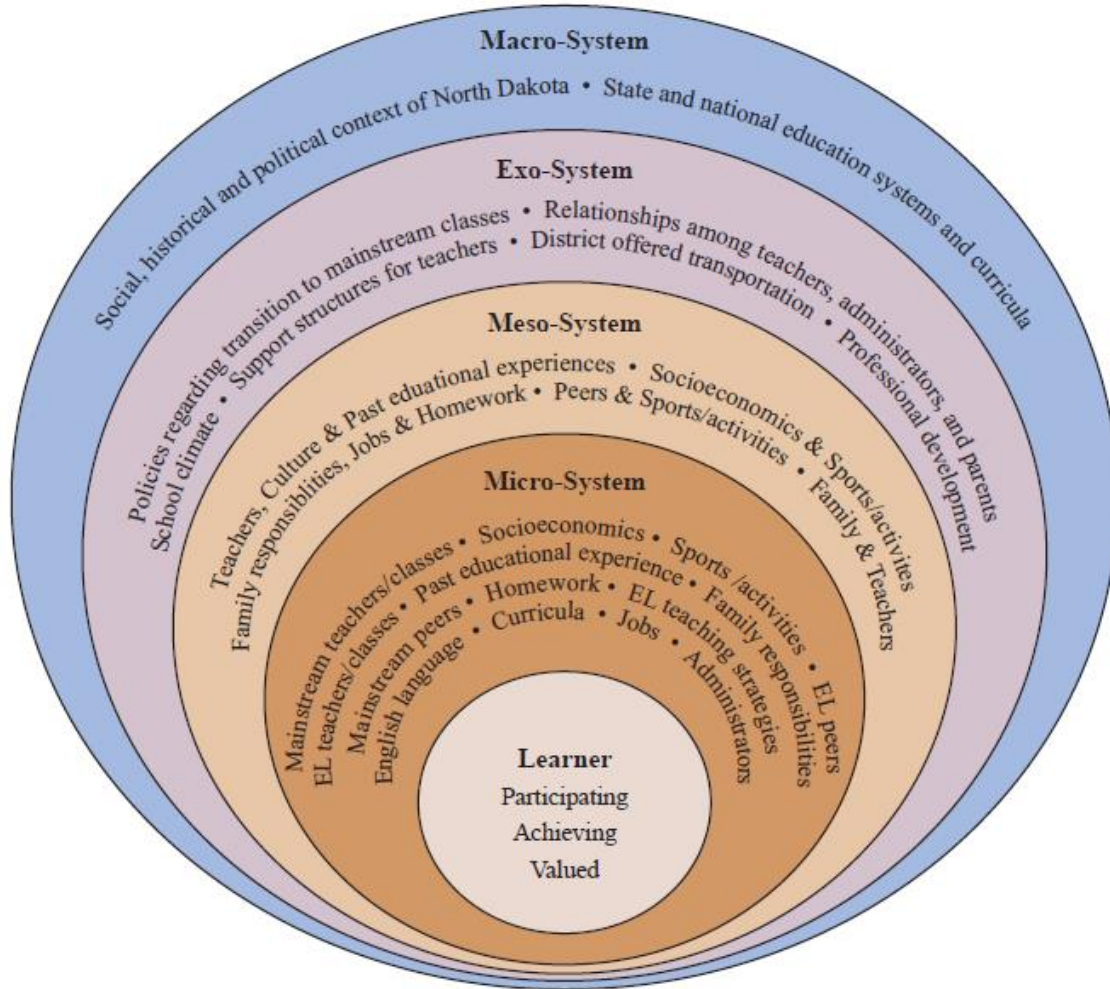
To conduct the data analysis, the researchers followed the stages outlined by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2013). The following stages were utilized: (1) *horizontalization*: Transcriptions were read and meaningful statements that exemplified the participant's experience of being a New American in their high school were highlighted; (2) *clusters of meaning*: the meaningful statements were grouped into themes; (3) *textural and structural description*: a description was written about what the participants experienced (textural) and how the participants experienced the phenomenon (structural); and (4) *essence*: a composite description of the participants' shared experience was presented.

Findings

Five major themes emerged in the analysis: collaborative and welcoming EL teachers, differences between mainstream and EL classes and teachers, problematic experiences with school administrators, valued connections with American peers, and balancing family responsibilities with school. Figure 1 presents the environmental factors identified in the data within the EIE framework.

Figure 1

Factors Affecting the Inclusive Educational Experiences of New American Learners within the EIE Framework



Collaborative and Welcoming EL Teachers

All participants expressed their comfort with their sheltered EL classes. As Reshma describes, “When I was in EL classes, I was never afraid to communicate with my teachers because all of my friends, all students are... like me from different country, you know, bilingual students.” Reshma and others derived comfort from the shared experience of being bilingual in EL classes. However, much of their comfort with EL classes was due to actions of the EL teachers. The three subthemes described here are: collaboration between EL teachers; getting to know EL students, and; ensuring EL students are included in activities.

Participants discussed how EL teachers consistently collaborated to ensure students academically achieved. Faheem recalled how his EL English and EL

Science teachers coordinated to ensure that he could participate and achieve. He stated that he “used to struggle with, like, biology, just ‘cause the language... was just a little bit tough for me” but he didn’t need to seek help on his own because “the teachers [were] already doing that.” By coordinating about Faheem’s language skills, the EL teachers added scaffolding that improved his academic performance.

Participants also described how the EL teachers would get to know them personally, actions that helped them to feel valued. Akinyi stated,

[The EL teachers] had a lot of involvement with their kids, um, and they tried to get to know their kids, one on one. Um, try to find out what their situations at home was like, if anything was going on. Try to help us in a lot of ways that, um, you wouldn't think your teachers would be able to help you in. It kind of helped us become a bigger family.

Each participant recalled instances where an EL teachers made a concerted effort to assist or include them in an activity. Faheem recalled when an EL teacher called him a taxi so he would be able to get home after a sports team practice because there is no district-provided transportation after school. Reflecting on this experience, Faheem stated, “he had no reason to do that, you know, ... he doesn't want us to like feel excluded. He wants us to be involved into things. He wants us to get into things.” This experience and others highlight the collaborative and welcoming nature of the EL teachers that supported the participation, achievement, and value of the participants.

Differences between Mainstream and EL Classes and Teachers

After students complete the highest level of EL English, they transition to mainstream classes that are primarily comprised of native English speakers. All participants reflected about their initial discomfort with this transition due to a fear of speaking in front of their mainstream peers. Faheem described himself as, “that quiet kid in class for, like, the first two and a half months” when he first entered mainstream classes because he didn’t “trust [his] language.” Many feared asking questions with obvious answers or making grammatical errors. As a result, many participants would not initially participate.

The participants noted three primary differences between EL and mainstream teachers: EL teachers’ familiarity with EL students and their personal circumstances; EL teaching strategies; mainstream teachers’ lack of cultural competence.

Akinyi discussed how EL teachers knew her personally while the mainstream teachers knew nothing about her. She said,

It was a bit different because [the EL teachers] knew all about our lives. So, if anything had happened at home, they would know, um, if we needed, I don't know, [a] walk, just to go take a walk in the school while we're in class. We got frustrated or something like that. It was just a bit more different

because our [mainstream] teachers didn't know us how our ELL teachers knew us.

Akinyi added that EL students in mainstream classes are held

to the same standard that they hold all the students, which in some aspects, yes, that is perfectly fine. But with some kids it's kind of different because they have things going on in their lives that maybe that teacher doesn't know about.

By not being familiar with New Americans' personal circumstances and the difficulties they face, mainstream teachers do not account for all factors when assessing these students' schoolwork and assigning grades.

Another general difference is that EL teachers employ EL teaching strategies. Reshma explained, "[EL teachers] don't use big words, you know. They [use] lots of examples and everything. And, you know, going to mainstream classes was just like reading a book, explaining it once and that's it." Similarly, Akinyi said,

I used to get more help. I used to be able to ask a question and... get a helpful answer... a more in-depth answer where [an EL teacher] would explain it to me. But with regular English classes, it's kind of like, here's your assignment. Here you go. *Done* type of thing where some teachers wouldn't fully explain to [me].

By providing several examples, using basic language, and offering more complete explanations, elements that facilitate participation and achievement, the participants expressed they could engage in classes and understand the material.

Lastly, participants discussed how many mainstream teachers treated them with disrespect and demonstrated a lack of cultural competence. Mireille candidly stated, "You would find, like, some [mainstream] teachers don't care about the ELL kids. And the ELL teachers are the only ones who cares about their kids. So, you would feel like... you don't belong here." As a result, Mireille shared that she took her mother to her EL teachers during parent-teacher conferences because she was afraid mainstream teachers would disrespect her mother like they disrespected her. Similarly, Faheem explained that mainstream teachers "need to learn about different... cultures [and] get involved in... diversity classes. That will probably help the students... to feel more comfortable and teachers need to get to know students as an individual, not just another number."

Some participants stated that the disrespectful behavior exhibited by some mainstream teachers sets a negative example for white students. Mireille said,

If a teacher can treat you [with disrespect], it will give your fellow student... a reason to treat you the same. It's like an example, if a visitor comes to my home and my mother is not welcoming, will I be welcoming? No, I won't. Because she's setting an example to me and nobody can blame me for doing it... So, that's what it is. [The mainstream teachers] are not understanding. They are ignorant.

Overall, participants emphasized that mainstream teachers must become culturally competent, treat New American students with respect, and set a positive example for their white peers or they risk poor achievement and a lack of belongingness.

Problematic Encounters with School Administrators

The participants had a variety of experiences with school administrators. Some experiences were positive, demonstrating a mentor/mentee relationship. For example, Faheem said his last school principal was “somebody you can look up to. Someone you can count on to, like, help you... not just if you're in trouble or something, but, like, to just guide you in whatever you need to be guided in.”

However, many experiences with school administrators were troubling and demonstrated a lack of support or disrespect towards New American students and students of color. Each participant shared disconcerting personal experiences with administrators. The three subthemes of racial slurs, lack of support for pregnant students, and inconsistency in dress code enforcement are presented.

Faheem recalled when a Black student told his principal that he witnessed a white student using a racial slur. Faheem stated that the principal “repeat[ed] the word itself like it's okay to say it” when he spoke to the student. Faheem stated that by repeating the slur, the principal implicitly expressed that students are permitted to use slurs as long as they are not directed towards another student. He described the helplessness he and other students feel when principals do not act to protect them:

If I'm seeking protection from you and you're not doing anything to protect me, then, who should I trust to protect me, you know? ...They can't trust their teachers, they can't trust the principal. Who should they reach out for help, you know?

Participants described other problematic situations where they did not have support from administrators, including when they or their friends became pregnant. Akinyi said her principal told her to drop out and get a GED because she was pregnant, but she refused and ultimately graduated with a diploma from her high school. She added that pregnant refugee students do not get support from school administrators. She said,

I've seen so many refugee kids that, um, throughout my high school years that were pregnant... And it just kind of surprises me that some principals are not giving them that support that they need and saying, hey, if you need help, please let us know, reach out to us, you know? That they could ask for help, but instead [administrators are] pushing them forward and telling them get out of my school, you know?

Lastly, the participants raised concerns about inconsistent dress code enforcement. Faheem recalled when a principal told a Black New American

student that she could not wear a hair bandanna to “just hold her hair in the morning” because it’s “gang related stuff.” Faheem continued, “then [my friend] sees, like, you know, a white student passing by [with] a head bandanna and it was red... so it's okay for her to wear, but not ok for [my friend]?” In other words, two students could wear the same bandanna, but the Black student is perceived as being associated with criminality and is identified as out of dress code. For Faheem and other participants, it seemed that white students were generally treated differently by administrators due to their skin color.

Valued Connections with American Peers

Although the participants stated that they were initially afraid to interact with their American peers, each acknowledged the importance of socializing with them in and out of the classroom. Three subthemes emerged in the data: culture-sharing classroom activities; sports; and valued friendships with Americans.

The participants described how some EL teachers incorporated culture-sharing assignments in the classroom, including an essay about their journey to America. The participants expressed their excitement about composing their narrative and sharing it with other students and the local community in a public forum. Akinyi said,

It takes one student to make that difference in anybody's lives. I've seen so many different people that had different mindsets and all they have to hear is one person's story or one person's sorrows and it quickly changes their minds.

Several participants proudly shared how some community members now understand the importance of valuing New Americans after hearing their narratives.

Additionally, sports were widely-identified as a space for developing friendships with American students. Akinyi explained, “there’s really nothing else that helps these kids connect together and kind of build that bond, that friendship, or that family, like the soccer, that the sports teams have.”

Similarly, Faheem highlighted how the parents of his teammates made him feel valued and accepted. Faheem said,

The parents are there supporting you. Like if you need help whatsoever, they're helping you... there's parents there... white parents basically, they're supporting you and they take you as one of... their kids... it shows that they care about you. It shows that you're being a part of community. You're being... one of them.

Mireille described incidents where her American teammates defended her when players on the opposing team called her racial slurs, “the white kids would stand up for you. Because they were like, we are a team, we all go to the same school, you calling out one, you’re calling out all of us.”

Overall, the participants valued their friendships with American peers. As Francois explains, these friendships facilitate the belongingness of New Americans into American life and schools. He said,

[What I would] like students to know... about refugees is, try and welcome them because we've gone through a lot... we are being called asylum seekers because we come to seek asylum. We need to feel welcomed. When we are being discriminated again here, where do we run? ... if the students won't include us as one of the family because... of the accent or because we don't share the same background, that will remind us all the hardship that we passed through. That... makes us feel like we are not included in the world.... We wanna *feel* like we are America. I would like other students or Americans to take *us* who are refugees or immigrants as one.

Balancing Family Responsibilities with School

All participants discussed their many family responsibilities, duties they must balance with schoolwork and extracurricular activities. Two subthemes discussed here include: working while attending school; caring for siblings; the responsibility to achieve academically.

Francois shared that he lives with his mother and younger siblings while his father lives in Africa. His mother recently suffered an injury that prevents her from working full-time. So, as he states, "In [my father's] absence, I'm the father. So, I was forced to start a job." He described the pressure he endured from waking up at 6am to take his mother to work and then coming home to try to finish some schoolwork before leaving at 11am for his shift. Francois said,

Waking up knowing you have a lot [of] assignments to do, there is no one to help you [sighs]. There is work after that. The job that you are forced to go. There is rent, bills. There is a lot. I'm a little bit behind, but I'm trying. I'm trying. Hopefully I make it.

Most participants mentioned the time they spent caring for their siblings while their parents worked. Balancing jobs and childcare with schoolwork was exhausting for many participants.

Akinyi discussed how she has balanced working in retail since the age of 14 while going to high school and taking care of her baby. She found work to support her family while her mother cared for her siblings. She also had to move between school districts several times as her family searched for a housing option with enough bedrooms for her family members. At one point, Akinyi's family lived in two apartments because a single apartment could not accommodate her family. Reflecting on her responsibilities and moves while in high school, Akinyi concluded, "It seems a lot harder when you are from a refugee family."

Family responsibilities also extended to achieving in school. Many participants stressed that their primary purpose in the United States was to get an education, something that was not afforded to many of their parents. Faheem shared the story of his mother who experienced civil war and the death of her father in Sudan. Although his mother “loved school,” she had to leave and find work to help her mother. Faheem said he knew his purpose in the United States was to get an education. He said his mother told him,

“I have lost everything in life. I have lost... everything and you guys are my only hope.... I don't want nothing but for you to succeed and, like, you know, your degree is my degree... your diploma is my diploma...” and when I got my high school diploma, she was more happy than I [was].

Furthermore, Faheem said that his parents are his “main motivation” for succeeding in school. He explained,

I have no reason, no excuse... to give up, just because one class or like this and that. No, I'm not gonna give up because they lost everything in their life.... My family, they give up everything in their hand just to support me to be a better human being and... to seek better education, as well, so that we don't, I don't, live the life that they lived.

Discussion and Implications for Schools

This study investigated the high school experiences of New Americans in a smaller city in North Dakota to identify factors that promote or undermine their participation, achievement, and value. The phenomenological design of this study focuses on an individual's interpretations of an experience within an environment, and not just the objective characteristics of the environment, perspectives necessary for researchers to make sense of a phenomenon (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Findings yield important insights regarding ways to create more inclusive learning environments for New Americans.

Anderson et al.'s (2014) EIE model suggests multiple layers of influence affect New Americans' high schools experiences in North Dakota. First, micro-system interactions with mainstream teachers and administrators were problematic and prevented the participants from participating, achieving, and feeling valued in their schools. Participants were afraid to speak in front of their mainstream peers and teachers, a finding supported by Kanu (2008). They spoke of unaccommodating mainstream teachers who did not incorporate EL instructional strategies, who spoke too fast, who made them feel uncomfortable to ask questions, and who did not get to know them and their specific circumstances, findings supported by Roy and Roxas (2011). Participants described encounters with some mainstream teachers and administrators who were rude, racist and generally unhelpful. Many participants never developed trusting relationships with mainstream teachers or administrators and continued to seek EL teachers for assistance.

When administrators and teachers are not trained to understand the issues and circumstances that challenge New American students in schools, they risk acting or speaking in ways that embarrass, alienate and humiliate students (McBrien, 2005). As schools become increasingly diverse, administrators and teachers should begin by accommodating for individual learners and their unique experiences and family, economic, and social circumstances so that students can participate, achieve, and be valued. One implication is for schools to create co-teaching opportunities for mainstream teachers with instructional guidance from an EL teacher. Additionally, professional development sessions focused on EL training, cultural competence, and strengths-based methods would support inclusive education environments. By becoming familiar with the issues faced by New Americans, and by taking EL professional development courses (Roy & Roxas, 2011), schools are better able to create inclusive educational environments for New American students.

Second, New American youth benefit from in-class and extracurricular opportunities that promote accepting and positive relationships with their American peers, meso-system factors that strengthen inclusive environments. Schools must incorporate curricula that allow for culture sharing. The journey to America narrative project offered by one of the EL teachers was unanimously the most memorable assignment among the participants. This assignment allowed students to share their life experiences and culture, educate community members and peers who have had limited contact with New Americans, and helped New Americans form friendships with their mainstream peers, all of which boosted inclusivity. Fruja Amthor and Roxas (2016), Mendenhall and Bartlet (2018), and Suárez-Orozco et al. (2009) also find that culturally relevant teaching that promotes and encourages New American students' native cultures and personal experiences supports student engagement, sense of belonging, and academic success. The use of multicultural education has also shown to decrease school personnel prejudices about New American students and reduce bullying and discrimination from peers (Ghosh & Galczynski, 2014; Osler, 2015).

Third, due to their many responsibilities outside of school and a lack of economic resources, several participants reported that they were unable to engage in extracurricular activities, including sports and after school activities. Schools must recognize the demands on New Americans outside of school and how these responsibilities impede their participation, achievement, and value. Schools should incorporate activities and clubs that offer attendance flexibility and events within the school day. Also, schools may consider providing transportation for students after activities end. Additionally, teachers must look outside of curriculum objectives and depersonalized structures and be intentional in the amount of homework they assign to students (McBrien, 2005).

The final implication calls for schools to create exo-system partnerships between the schools, families of New Americans, and community organizations. Parents, caregivers, and extended families of New Americans can and should be more actively involved in understanding the new schooling environment and supporting students' academic success. Rah et al. (2009) recommends: 1)

creating a bilingual liaison position, 2) partnering with community organizations, and 3) creating parent education programs focused on issues related to their child's schooling in the United States.

Future Directions

The aim of qualitative inquiry, especially in-depth, small-scale research like this study, is to provide an in-depth understanding of the shared experiences of a group of individuals and not to generalize results to the broader population or other small cities with growing populations of New Americans. Further research should examine the experiences of New American youth in high schools located in other small cities. Also, a longitudinal study that interviews participants at multiple points during their enrollment and post-graduation may provide richer insights. Future research should focus on the experiences of teachers and administrators who are experienced with the factors and processes that impact inclusive education outside of the immediate school environment so those systems can be explored.

Conclusion

The New American high school experience in a smaller city located in North Dakota is complex. The findings suggest that EL teachers fostered inclusive environments that enabled participants to participate, achieve, and be valued. EL teachers developed trusting relationships with New American students and they employed teaching strategies and curricula that allowed students to speak out and share their experiences and culture. Also, extra-curricular and in-class interactions with American students were vital to inclusive environments. Participants described the belongingness they felt during activities with their American peers. However, the participants' experiences with mainstream teachers and administrators often inhibited inclusivity. Many described racist, unfair, and hostile experiences that left them feeling unwelcome, unsafe, and dejected. Lastly, the lives of New Americans outside of school are fraught with responsibilities, including jobs and childcare. School administrators and teachers may not fully comprehend the issues and challenges New American students experience. Professional development opportunities focused on EL instruction, cultural competence, and strengths-based methods would support inclusive education environments.

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