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"I FEEL LIKE I'M SAFE AGAIN:" THE MIDDLE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF

IMMIGRANTS IN A MULTILINGUAL/MULTICULTURAL SETTING

A Dissertation Presented

By

Kathleen Brinegar

to

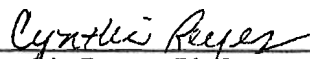The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education
Specializing in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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Accepted by the Faculty of the Graduate College, The University of Vermont in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, specializing in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Dissertation Examination Committee:

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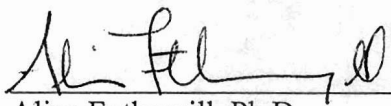Cynthia Reyes, Ph.D

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Date: February 6, 2009

ABSTRACT

As the number of immigrants and refugees grows in the US, 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, this community recently became a multilingual/multicultural setting. I documented the schooling experiences of my participants utilizing ethnographic methods including participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. My 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, ranging from little or no academic, emotional, and/or social support to such high levels of support that students felt ostracized and disempowered. The implications for researchers center on expanding the current research in middle grades best practice to include a new set of voices, while practical implications focus on creating a safe environment where immigrants can express themselves and feel comfortable asking for the level of support they need.

CITATION

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Challenging My Own Assumptions

As a classroom teacher in a small, largely rural community, I was completely

unprepared when Rosa, a seventh grade student who had come to the United States from

Puerto Rico with her family four years before, stepped into my classroom. Although

Rosa was an outstanding student and she had been in the United States long enough to

have acquired adequate verbal and written English skills, she was painfully shy and

reserved. Assuming that Rosa was being challenged enough through her written work, I

never encouraged her to speak up in class, participate in class discussions, or work on her

oral presentation skills until I received a phone call from her mother urging me to do so.

Without the insistence of Rosa's mother, I would have ignored the fact that Rosa had an

important voice that needed to be heard within my classroom. When I think back to the

two years I had Rosa as a student, I realize all of the mistakes I made with her that I wish

I could take back. As Rosa's language acquisition was strong, and largely complete, I did

not view her as an immigrant student. After all, once such a student has access to the

English language, does he or she not become like everyone else?

Luckily, through a strong bond that I made with Rosa and her family I still keep

in touch with her and have been called upon more than once to help Rosa through life

situations that require her to speak confidently in public. But I think about what could

have happened if Rosa's mother had never spoken up or if that bond was never formed.

What if I was Rosa's teacher those four years before when she arrived in the community

without speaking English, or even yet, was the only non-English speaker in my class, her

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grade, or even in the school? How could I have helped her develop the skills she needed to find her voice in my classroom and flourish?

Research Statement

Many small town schools in rural states face a shift in their populations from one of relative racial and cultural homogeneity to one much more diverse due to an influx of immigrants and/or refugees (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). These areas are faced with the schooling of populations that may have differing needs than the existing population ranging from the need for language acquisition (Curtin, 2005; Ruiz-Velasco & Fix, 2000) to the "crafting of bicultural identities" (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, pp. 112-113). Even if the change of an area's population only involves the addition of one or two immigrant/refugee families, schools have a responsibility to try to understand and meet the needs of their children.

Thus, as a middle level educator in a predominantly rural state where the student population is often devoid of any ethnic and/or cultural diversity, what does one do when an immigrant or refugee student enters the classroom? How can one begin to even understand what that student is going through? How can a positive schooling experience be created for that student? These are the questions that inspired me to explore the lives of young adolescent immigrant and refugee students who enter a school community in places where their experiences are far from the scope of understanding of, and are often misinterpreted by, even the most well intentioned educators. As such, the purpose of my study was to describe schooling from the perspective of a group of young adolescent immigrant and refugee students from various countries, including Vietnam, Bosnia,

Somalia, Burundi, and the Congo, in order to portray the schooling experiences of young adolescents from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

A Beginning Look: Teacher Responses to Immigrant and Refugee Students

During the spring of 2005, I conducted a pilot study, which reinforced the need for a closer examination of the schooling experiences of immigrant and refugee students from their own perspectives. Throughout the semester I conducted three hours of observations in a middle school science classroom consisting of nineteen students, four of whom were identified as immigrant/refugees. In addition I interviewed four school employees who have worked with middle level immigrant/refugee students in a variety of capacities: a reading specialist, middle school principal, former English language learner (ELL) teacher, and a regular classroom teacher. Eight initial themes emerged from the data that need to be further examined through the lens of middle level immigrant and refugee students. These themes were: access, identity, community, relationships, communication, assumptions, invisible rules, and shared learning. Each of these themes represented a series of critical ideas that ran throughout the interviews and observation of my pilot study and served to focus my examination of the literature and frame my research questions for this larger study. A brief description of each theme demonstrates the complex assumptions about immigrant and refugee students inherent in the data.

Access

The first theme, access, encompassed a variety of different challenges that immigrant and refugee students faced, according to school personnel. These included access to language both academic and social, access to everyday items such as food and clothing, and access to knowledge. Limited access to any one of these items was seen as

hindering the successful schooling of immigrant and refugee students and unfortunately, as one participant stated, most did not have access to all three:

> Ok, so not only have these people been oppressed by various things, on top of that they're expected to learn how to speak English and within that learning to speak English develop a social language plus an academic language. Those are the needs that they have on top of basic needs such as housing and food and healthcare and all of those things that they need. And the communication between home and school, most of their parents don't speak English so these children either become the interpreter or we have to get an interpreter.

As was evident in this quote, finding ways for students to access the things they needed was seen as a huge role of the teacher in a classroom with immigrant and refugee students. While this only began to cover the range of things participants described immigrant and refugee students as needing, all gave basic suggestions for how teachers could help immigrants and refugees access their curricula.

The discussion of student needs focused entirely around things that students were expected to learn in order to be successful: i.e. different forms of language, skill sets, and a certain knowledge base. As such, the teachers I interviewed saw their role in meeting these needs as largely academic in scope. What was critical about this discussion was that teachers never mentioned what different forms of language, skill sets, and types of knowledge *they* needed to develop in order to better educate their immigrant and refugee students. The onus seemed to be on the students themselves.

This teacher mindset fit with another significant sub theme within the larger issue of access; the need for schools to provide teachers with access to the training they needed to work successfully with immigrants and refugees. As one participant explained:

> The biggest thing I believe is that teachers need ongoing continued training for how to best support ELL students. For example one of the things…we get from ELL teachers is we have a purple folder and you get an ELL teacher tip maybe once a month or maybe every other month which is really good stuff… [such as] how long does language acquisition take, in class scaffolding, lesson modification…so the attempt is made to give people resources but I believe that many of the teachers can read this but that doesn't mean they can apply it… I think any…kind of ongoing professional development or modeling that we can give to teachers and actually reading through what I would call best practices for ELL students is important.

It was evident throughout all of the interviews that teachers had not received enough access to training, resulting in a limited ability to help students access the things they needed. As such, they were unable to even articulate the types of training they needed beyond how to modify instruction and assessment for students. Again, the focus was on what students needed to learn about school, not what the school needed to learn about the students.

Identity

Another theme, identity, was more specific to young adolescent immigrants and refugees. The following quote from an interview clearly reflected this theme:

People say a high school kid coming in with no language, no literacy, that's tough, but you put a middle school kid in that situation and he doesn't know who he is yet and he's emerging along with everybody else but he doesn't have the language… I want someone who looks at them as a kid, who knows they're gonna grow. Just like American English speaking kids they're going to grow and change into a young adult but they don't have any language to tell us who they are and they don't know who they are because they have no standards against our culture nor do their parents.

This powerful statement spoke to a challenge that all adolescents face; that of discovering whom they are and what their place in the world is (Erikson, 2005; Stevenson, 2002). For this interviewee, immigrant and refugee students possessed the added stresses of a limited access to language and a whole new set of cultural norms to become accustomed to. Given this lens it was evident why this participant saw the importance of placing these kids with teachers who viewed them as everyone else.

However, once again this statement echoed two problematic assumptions about immigrant and refugee students that permeated the data. Most apparent was the assumption that the identity of these students needed to be measured against that of their native born peers and a certain set of cultural norms. While there was certainly evidence to support the idea that peers, more than adults, influence young adolescents (Erikson, 2005; Stevenson, 2002), once again the focus was on how the immigrant and refugee students must change to be "normal" as opposed to suggesting a need for the school community to redefine what "normal" is. Secondly, it called for teachers to view immigrant and refugee students' development into adulthood as they would everyone

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else's. This called for teachers to be colorblind (Delpit, 1995), or perhaps "cultural blindness" was a more appropriate term in this case, given that a large percentage of the state's immigrant and refugee students have traditionally been Caucasian, failed to consider the significance of and challenges faced by these students' development of "bi-cultural identities" (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Community and Relationships

According to the participants, immigrant and refugee students not only needed to be surrounded by teachers with certain dispositions and training, but they also needed to be surrounded by people who cared. Community was the third theme that emerged from the data as participants consistently referred to words such as belonging, comfort, safety, and support. As one participant pointed out:

> I see them as having lost something really important…their sense of home
> and their sense of commons where there is a group of people that care about them
> whether they are living in a small village in Somalia…whether you're from
> China, wherever you're from, their sense of the community or commons or home
> has been lost and to me that is very, very great and it is our job…to make schools
> a commons for all kids.

This theme directly related to the fourth theme of relationships. In particular, the participants spoke of the value of multiage teaming in working with immigrant and refugee students. Using this organizational structure allowed students to stay with the same teachers and a smaller group of students for multiple years, resulting in the formation of closer relationships. Participants also noted that due to the nature of young adolescents, the students' relationships with their parents were shifting. This became

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even more significant when immigrant and refugees acquired both a proficiency in English before their parents as well as a greater exposure to American cultural norms that conflicted with those from their native countries. Participants noted how important it was for schools to recognize and somehow accommodate for this added stress on students. However, once again participants were unable to articulate how this could be accomplished.

Communication

The fifth theme centered on building communication networks among students, parents, and the school community. One participant shared her frustration about the non-verbal messages her school communicated through what was displayed in the hallways and classrooms:

> I am disgusted by the fact that…all of the district puts up Christmas decorations, Halloween decorations…I just feel like the concept of people from other cultures is skewed…I saw this picture…I think that they thought they were recognizing diversity, but it was children around the world and they showed people in wooden shoes and it was just this terrible thing that was just sorting people by how they might dress…

Too often diversity was celebrated in artificial ways that communicated a lack of awareness. Participants all desired and saw a need for dialogue within schools around diversity and how to best represent this to the community.

Assumptions

This need for diversity training was evident through the theme of assumptions. Participants shared multiple stories of the range of assumptions that both teachers and

students made about refugee and immigrant students. Negative and incorrect assumptions were often seen as the cause of students being unchallenged in their classrooms as teachers assumed that they could not keep up with the work. Participants also described some teachers as making assumptions about immigrant and refugee families. One common assumption was that immigrant and refugee families were too busy working to participate in their child's education. Participants saw these types of assumptions as silencing the voices of the students and families and for non-responsive practices to develop. Concern was also expressed for the assumptions made by students that led to discrimination, prejudice, and harassment towards immigrant and refugee students. They perceived this harassment as making the immigrant and refugee students rightly hesitant to embrace signs of friendship:

> We get some kids who say, "go back," who feel threatened by them…" What are you doing here?" "I hate you," "Your parents don't work," which they're not true statements, but these are statements that they have obviously heard at home…and then you get the wonderful…kids that will reach out…and the refugee child won't accept that reaching out because they're suspicious.

Thus, the participants felt that the assumptions that both adults and students made created a climate of distrust within schools. Once again, however, suggestions for shifting such an attitude were not discussed.

Invisible Rules

Invisible rules, the seventh theme, encompassed the unspoken rules that permeate school cultures and include appearances, behaviors, and non-verbal clues, also referred to as social capital (Coleman, 1988), that interviewees felt the immigrant and refugee

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students did not have the cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) to understand. Prevalent examples of these included: words that were inappropriate to use in school, raising your hand in class, signing out to go to the bathroom, and what it meant to plagiarize. A story was shared about two male Somali students who were made fun of for holding hands in the hallway. How were they to know that this was not "acceptable" behavior for two straight men in our society? Teachers saw the learning of these invisible rules as a huge challenge for students from other parts of the world. Once again the "acceptability" of the "invisible rules" themselves was not questioned. The burden was placed on the immigrant and refugee students to learn to follow them.

Shared Learning

Through the final theme, shared learning, although discussed in vague terms, some participants recognized that schools needed to embrace the curiosity of their young adolescent students by creating opportunities and mechanisms that allowed students and teachers to learn from one another. The data for this theme encompassed ideas such as reflection, modeling, and diversity awareness that the participants felt all schools should be doing on a regular basis anyway, but that often got pushed to the side in the chaotic environments of their schools.

Research Questions and Significance

The above data were significant in the development of my current study in two important ways. The first was it gave me a window into the perceptions of educators in a predominantly White, small town about the schooling of its immigrant and refugee population. As the preceding examination of these perceptions demonstrated, the participants interviewed showed strong care and compassion for their immigrant and

refugee students. However, they also shared some disconcerting assumptions about their roles in educating immigrant and refugee students and their perception of students' need to assimilate to the culture of the school. The teachers assumed that their immigrant and refugee students were identified as either fitting or not fitting within the school's existing culture. It became increasingly important to me to further this examination, broadening the scope of school personnel that I examined, adding the perspectives of the students themselves to the discussion. With the inclusion of these pivotal voices, this dissertation addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the schooling experiences of immigrant and refugee middle school students in a historically linguistically and culturally homogeneous setting?

2. What do the immigrant and refugee students in this community want their teachers, other school personnel, and peers to know and understand about them?

The data from my pilot study also led me to the four bodies of literature that formed the theoretical framework for my study: the middle grades concept, identity formation, schooling and immigrant youth, and teacher perceptions and diversity. Descriptions of these bodies of literature follow in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The population of young adolescents, ten to fourteen year olds, entering this

nation's middle schools continues to grow more diverse. One subpopulation that adds to

this diversity is made up immigrant children. 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 2.84 million foreign-born United

States residents under the age of eighteen (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). However, little

research centered on the schooling experiences of immigrant youth exists even today. As

a movement that has been focusing on the education of all students far 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.

My study is located at the intersection of four bodies of literature: the middle

grades concept, identity formation, schooling and immigrant youth, and teacher

perception and diversity. While examining these four bodies of literature showed the

potential of the middle grades concept in helping schools to meet the needs of immigrant

students, it also reinforced the need for middle grades research to focus more specifically

on subpopulations of students such as immigrants and refugees.

The Middle Grades Concept

Overview of the Middle Grades Reform Movement

Adolescence is often characterized as a period where the mind and body undergo

significant physical, emotional, cognitive, and social changes. Developmentally, young

adolescents crave both independence and a sense of belonging as they begin to define themselves (Brighton, 2007; Scales, 2003; Stevenson, 2002). Based on such ideas of young adolescence, much research has emerged regarding the education of students between the ages of ten and fourteen. Such research is based on the notion that traditional forms of schooling for this age group, namely the junior high model, have neglected the unique traits of young adolescent students (See David, 1998, for samples of the earliest writings on junior highs and middle schools).

Powell (2005) stated, "Junior highs were intended to get students ready for high school, where serious study and/or job preparation was to take place" (p. 4). Early critiques identified the following problems with the traditional junior high: curriculum was too subject-centered, teachers were unprepared to teach young adolescents, classrooms were teacher and textbook centered, and students were tracked (Powell, 2005). Stage-environment fit theory further extended such notions by claiming that a young adolescent's schooling environment must be a match with her developmental needs (Eccles et al, 1993). Supporters of a middle school philosophy have promoted the need for schools that are developmentally responsible. Structures and concepts such as teaming, advisory, student-centered learning, and integrated curricula (Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association, 2003; Stevenson, 2002), have become the cornerstones of such schooling models.

Two Models of Middle Grades Schooling

Research devoted to young adolescent identity and the best ways for schools to meet adolescent needs has flourished in the last thirty years. With the formation of the National Middle School Association (NMSA) in 1973, the creation of middle schools

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became a major reform agenda. In 1982 the NMSA published its first position statement

on middle schools titled, *This We Believe*. Just a few years later, in 1989, the Carnegie

Council on Adolescent Development (CCAD) compiled and published their landmark

study on adolescents, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*.

These two documents became the basis for middle level reform. As research into the

middle level philosophy of schooling continued, both the NMSA and CCAD published

revised versions of the middle level model. The basis for the NMSA's 1995 position

statement is cited below:

Developmentally responsive middle schools are characterized by:
- Educators committed to young adolescents
- A shared vision
- High expectations for all
- An adult advocate for every student
- Family and community partnerships
- A positive school climate

Therefore, developmentally responsive middle schools provide:
- Curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Varied teaching and learning approaches
- Assessment and evaluation that promote learning
- Flexible organizational structures
- Programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
- Comprehensive and support services. (NMSA, 1995)

The first six characteristics provide an overview of the elements that must be in place for

schools to make appropriate decisions about how to best meet the needs of their young

adolescent students. The second six describe the range of research supported

programmatic components of middle level education. In whole, these twelve pieces

represent a vision for creating schools for young adolescents that are developmentally

responsible (NMSA, 1995). What is important to note, is that:

…this position statement is not presumed to be all inclusive or definitive, nor does

it offer a specific blueprint for the 'ideal' middle level school…Thoughtful

middle level educators will know best what needs to be done to apply these

principles in their own communities. (NMSA, 1995, p. 2)

In other words, there is no one way to meet the needs of young adolescents. The middle

level philosophy on education promotes an awareness of the young adolescent so that

schools can create their own thoughtful visions and policies centered on the unique needs

of this age group.

Similarly, the CCAD's *Turning Points* model (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p.25),

revised in 2000, presented a framework for creating schools that promote the success of

every middle grades student. The framework included the following components:

relevant curricula and assessment, instructional methods that promote high expectations,

community-oriented school organization, democratic school governing bodies, staff

knowledgeable about young adolescents, a safe environment, and parent/community

relationships. These components were depicted in the shape of a circle to represent the

idea that each element was equally important in meeting the needs of young adolescents.

Jackson & Davis (2000) stressed that each of the seven elements described was

dependent on the others to reach this goal. Additionally, they reinforced the importance

of schools to adopt a holistic, systematic implementation of their design approach,

explaining that each element in their design would not function correctly without the

others in place. Like the NMSA, Jackson & Davis (2000) stressed that the individual

nature of each school would affect how the components were put into practice.

These two documents serve as the basis for much policy and restructuring around middle level education at multiple levels: local, state, regional, and national. It is important to note that neither publication mentions immigrant and/or refugee students specifically. "Turning Points 2000" does contain a two page section titled *Instructional Reform and Broad-Based Intervention for Language Minority Students*, which states, "Since language minority students are at high risk for dropping out of high school, the middle grades are the critical period for instructional and emotional intervention with these students" (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p.86). The section makes two recommendations for ensuring this: the importance of parent involvement and providing on site access to guidance, health care, and social service professionals (p.86). This is problematic in two ways. First, the specific focus on language minority students, without mention of the broader immigrant population, ignores the unique situations of immigrant and refugee young adolescents with English proficiency. Second, the recommendations are focused on students' emotional needs. A few additional pages on this topic follow, but the assumption throughout seems to be that their model would be sufficient in promoting healthy social and academic development for language minority students. While few educational scholars refute these recommended practices, critics note the hegemony of a movement centered on a white, middle class, male perception of identity (Brown, 2005). A strong research base focused on multicultural and multilingual middle school settings, such as that in my study, needs to be established before the middle grades concept can be deemed successful in diverse settings.

Ethnic and Cultural Identity and Middle Grades Research

In order to understand just what was meant by critiques of the possible impact of the homogeneous nature of middle grades research, I undertook a review of the literature on identity formation. Despite the vast number of theories and attitudes surrounding the notion of ethnic and cultural identity formation described below, it became clear that what each theorist shared was an understanding of adolescence as a critical time in this process. As adolescents spend a large percentage of time in school, it is only natural that their schooling experiences would largely impact their identity formation process through their relationships with peers, teachers, and other relevant school personnel. The examination of ethnic and cultural identity that I present below reiterates how important it is for middle grades research to include multicultural perspectives. Not only will it help illuminate whether middle grades approaches to schooling serve to accomplish for all students what their intended purpose is- to provide a positive schooling experience, devoted to democratic principles, which takes the unique experiences of its students into consideration- but neglecting to do so could have serious consequences for a large population of young adolescent students.

Eriksonian Perspectives

An apt place to start in examining identity formation is with the work of Erikson (1963, 2005), whose views on identity formation have provided the framework for much research on this topic for the past fifty years. Erikson's (2005) views are rooted in the idea that identity formation is a psychosocial process, where "…the individual judges himself in light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them…" (p. 247). He described

this process as beginning with an identification stage when children identify with those who have the most influence over their lives, generally parents and guardians. From there, children move into adolescence and become focused on how they look in the eyes of others. They identify with their peers more than with the adults in their lives. This leads to a period of "identity confusion" as adolescents start to identify who they are as opposed to who they are not. Identity formation occurs when one's community identity intersects with the way one defines him/herself. In other words, a person's identity forms through their experience of "fittedness" (p. 258).

Based on this framework, a variety of theories focused on ethnic and cultural identity have developed. In applying Erickson's (1963) psychosocial definition of identity, Ward (2005) described how the development of one's black self needed to be based on how one understood his/her individual self as a member of a racial group. This is particularly significant during adolescence, when an association with a group that is different from others, a clique, is needed. However, "as the black child sees herself as others see her, she knows that she is viewed in this society as a member of a devalued group" (Powell, 1982 as cited in Ward, 2005, p. 262). This idea of "social mirroring" (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Ward, 2005; Winnicott, 1971) is a reoccurring theme throughout the literature on ethnic and cultural identity. Some youth respond negatively and believe the stereotypes they see mirrored in others, while others reject them.

Gay (1987) used Erikson's (1963) description of the adolescent "identity confusion" stage to describe how black teens who reject the mirrored stereotypes start to question whether they should be measured by white norms. Ward (2005) extended this

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idea by defining "identity confusion" for blacks as "I am not what you believe black people to be, and I am black" (p. 262) and stated that this process is necessary for positive self-concept to develop. She further stated that the process of black identity formation provides "three opportunities for growth" for black youth who are supported appropriately. The first is "role negation" or the ability to reject negative stereotypes. The second is the freedom to create one's identity on her/his own terms, and the third is to become a leader to effect change in one's social environment. However, Ward (2005) went on to state that organizations that promote assimilation take these opportunities away from black youth. Powell (1982) echoed this sentiment. "When peer acceptance is dependent upon how white one is, then education becomes a subtractive process, a relinquishing of cultural self-identity" (as cited in Ward, 2005, pp. 266-267).

Extending Erikson's Views

Other theories of ethnic and cultural identity formation extend Erikson's (1963) views. They argue that his views are only applicable in homogeneous worlds because most youth do not have the freedom to choose their role in society (Marcia, 1966; Phinney, 1990; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez Orozco, 2001). Marcia (1966) altered Erikson's (1963) model in the development of her "identity status approach," which describes four stages in the identity formation process. The first, diffusion, which most adolescents fall into, is the stage where one is unable to make an identity commitment. The second, foreclosure, is defined by inflexible and defensive behavior, and a strong reliance on those in authoritative positions. People in moratorium, the third stage, do not conform, but are not yet comfortable enough with themselves to form intimate relationships with others. This stage is considered the least stable, and is particularly detrimental to those

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who stay here for a long period of time. In the final stage, identity achievement, one is secure enough in him/herself to form intimate relationships with others (as cited in Kroger, 2004). An understanding of these stages is necessary if one is to subscribe to the work of Phinney (1990), whose model of ethnic identity is based on Marcia's (1966) work. He classified ethnic identity into three categories. The initial stage involves little or no questioning of one's ethnicity and is likened to Marcia's (1966) diffusion and foreclosure stages. Others can be found in the moratorium stage where one questions preexisting ethnic assumptions. The final stage, where one has achieved ethnic identity, involves both being secure and positive with one's own ethnic identity and willing to accept that of others.

Toward a Bicultural Model

Still others push the idea of ethnic and cultural identity even further, recognizing that today's youth no longer live in a homogeneous world. Through their extensive work with immigrant children, Suarez-Orozco & Suarez Orozco (2001) have found that youth need to develop identities that will thrive in a variety of different settings, i.e. home, school, and with their peers. They stated:

> Today, social scientists no longer consider identity a coherent, monolithic, and enduring construct. Rather, new work struggles with an understanding of how identities are crafted and recrafted as youth make their way in varied social settings. (p. 92)

They went on to say:

> When there is too much role confusion, when cultural guides are inadequate, and when there is cultural dissonance and strife, an adolescent will find it difficult to

develop a flexible and adaptive sense of identity. (p. 92)

Steele (1997) identified such challenges as "identity threats," and described how they often shape one's intellectual performance and identity negatively.

There are three types of ethnic identities described by Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco (2001) based on one's context and reaction to social mirroring, and rooted in the work of Fordham & Ogbu (1986). The first is total assimilation, or "ethnic flight style," when individuals not only enhance their own acceptance by the dominant culture, but move away from their association with an ethnic group. This is similar to Fordham & Ogbu's (1986) idea of "ethnic betrayal." They described how such betrayal is often unintentional and denote how doing well in school is often seen as a betrayal to one's ethnicity as an example of this idea. The second type of ethnic identity that Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco (2001) labeled is an adversarial identity, which they view as a rejection of mainstream culture. Fordham & Ogbu (1986) explained how some feel that subscribing to the dominant culture is a renunciation of their ethnic identity. Adolescents who adopt such an identity tend to have problems in school and often drop out (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Vigil, 1988). The chances of this, as well as that of an individual joining a gang, are increased when an adolescent struggles with the absence of a strong parental figure or role model (Vigil, 1988). What classifies the third type of ethnic identity is the creation of a new ethnic identity, or transcultural identity. Individuals in this category show a strong appreciation for the sacrifices that others made in order to get them where they are. For them, giving back is a part of "making it," and as such these individuals tend to enter fields that allow them to work for the creation of a better society. What gives them this success is their ability to operate

within more than one cultural code. In other words, they have acquired the competencies necessary to form "bicultural identities."

A Postmodern Perspective

While modernist notions of bicultural identities recognize the need for today's youth to be successful in a variety of cultural settings, the current theory does not neatly transfer to the multicultural/multilingual setting that exists for the students in my study. These are the students who are often the only ones from their country or area of origin. They do not have pressure from a peer group to hold on to their native culture and language. Instead, they seem to have no other option but to assimilate in order to have any sort of affiliation or sense of belonging. While the testing of this theory is beyond the scope of my study, it does shed light on an area that needs further exploration. By describing the middle grades experiences of immigrant and refugee students in such a diverse setting, I can begin to explore potential gaps that exist where the middle grades concept intersects with literature on identity formation. Examining what is currently known about the immigrant experience in schools will help to do this.

Schooling and Immigrant Youth

One study, which will be discussed later, did attempt to directly examine the effectiveness of the middle grades concept for one subpopulation of immigrant students, however very little research targeted at better understanding the relationship between middle grades education and immigrant populations exists. Chamberlain (2003) noted the lack of middle grades literature related to diverse populations. Given that today's growing numbers of middle grades educators must not only continue to support their students as they experience the nuances of young adolescence, but also 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). The following sections describe current literature that highlights the areas that most impact the schooling of immigrant youth.

A Brief Overview of the Social Services Perspective

Much of the literature related to schooling and immigrant youth came from a social services perspective, thus is focused on the variety of needs that often make transitioning to a new school unique for immigrant students. While it is important to describe, acknowledging its importance in beginning to draw attention to the unique experiences of immigrant students, I cannot do so without first pointing out its subtractive nature. It serves to uphold the dominant power structure, depicting immigrants as having something to overcome. This is in contrast to my belief that schools have the responsibility to change and adapt to their students, not the other way around.

Fong (2007), in summarizing this literature, distinguished between three different types of immigrant groups and the challenges individuals in each were most likely to face. She described the first, documented immigrant youth, as facing 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, 2007, p. 4) are a few of the things these youth often have to forfeit. The final group, refugee youth, have 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. While an awareness of these current obstacles are critical, the next steps are to identify what about the dominant culture is creating these challenges for immigrant and refugee youth and what changes can be made in our current schooling systems to help alleviate them.

A Single Focus: Language Proficiency

In their analysis of interview data of over 100 immigrant youth, Gaytan, Carhill, & Suarez-Orozco (2007) found that only seven percent of students 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 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 is for students who feel like they are 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.

Although I cannot stress enough the importance of recognizing the impact that language proficiency has on students, particularly young adolescents, it is critical to view the immigrant experience from a more holistic lens. While Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) 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. Igoa (1995) 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). In order to guide students in the way Igoa described, we need to understand more about the experiences of immigrant students in our nation's middle schools. After conducting a review of middle grades literature as it applies to immigrant and refugee students, Virtue (2007) echoed this,

> While the recent attention given to young adolescent ELLs in the middle level
> literature is much needed and long overdue, the emphasis of this body of work is
> on second language acquisition and associated implications for instructional
> design and implementation…In reality, positive, productive middle level
> experiences for immigrant and refugee middle school students …must also
> address the social and psychological development of the student, while affirming
> and respecting his or her cultural background (pp. 239-240).

A More Holistic View

Some educational researchers are looking beyond linguistics and framing the immigrant experience in a less subtractive way. Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco (2001) stated, "Beyond the obvious linguistic and curricular differences, children must learn to navigate in classrooms that are dominated by different cultural styles" (p. 148). Igoa (1995) discussed how such differences often caused immigrant students to experience a culture shock upon entering their new schools. Among other things, this culture shock often led to shyness. Igoa (1995) 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 (1995), friendly gestures and affirmation from peers and teachers go a long way toward helping immigrant students overcome this shyness.

According to Balderrama (1996), the purpose of her study, Mexican Immigrants in Middle Schools: Diversity, Organizational Structure and Effectiveness was to "identify organizational characteristics of junior high and middle schools that are likely to contribute to addressing the academic needs of Mexican immigrant students" (p. 54). While Balderrama did find that the practice of teaming helped to facilitate discussions surrounding individual immigrant students, she stated, "I found that many junior high and middle schools are disorganized when it comes to basic processes that are necessary for the effective schooling of immigrant students" (p. 54). She further stated that because schools were not really structured as "effective" middle schools, she was unable to make further determinations regarding middle level structure and organization and immigrant populations.

Balderrama (1996) recommended that further research on diversity and adolescents needed to switch from the traditional focus of using a psychological lens to others lenses such as the sociological. In addition, she called for schools to establish clear goals for educating immigrant students focused on their specific needs such as language instruction, as well as providing access to regular content classes and gifted education. In other words, she recommended that the entire faculty and staff of a school, not just ELL instructors, needed to be responsible for the education of immigrant students.

Gitlin, Buendia, Crosland, and Doumbia (2003) conducted a study titled, "The Production of Margin and Center: Welcoming-Unwelcoming of Immigrant Students." This study took place in a traditionally White, middle-class neighborhood. Gitlin et al., similarly to Balderrama (1996), found that the school's policies and procedures were not unified in regards to immigrant students, creating inconsistencies in how immigrant students were accepted and felt about school (pp. 118-119). In addition, they found that immigrant students remained largely marginalized and cited institutional racism as a major cause for this. They suggested that further research ask the question, "What role, if any, does institutional racism play in forming the relations between educational institutions and particular immigrant students?" (p. 119). This is a particularly interesting question given the importance of identity formation in young adolescence.

Teacher Perception and Diversity

Teachers are products of their own cultures and experiences and are therefore susceptible to making assumptions about education and their students that impact the way they teach. As Nieto (2002) stated,

> …institutional environments are never neutral: they are always based on particular views of human development, of what is worth knowing, and what it means to be educated. When young people enter schools, they are entering institutions that have already made some fundamental decisions about such matters, and in the process, some of these children may be left out through no fault of their own (p. 17).

Thus, the final body of literature examined involved looking at studies related to teachers' perceptions of diversity. While the intent of this section is not to judge a

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traditionally over-criticized group of individuals, it is important to examine this institutional issue. What the following literature suggests is the need to formalize a place and time for teachers to reflect, particularly when working with ELL students.

Examining Assumptions

Cochran-Smith (1995) advocated for the reexamining of educators' assumptions about students and families different from their own in order to construct meaningful pedagogy. She (1995) stated, "…it is contradictory to the concept of cultural diversity itself to expect that educational experts can enumerate specific practices that teachers should learn and then apply across schools and communities with different histories and different needs" (p. 494). She noted that when schools try to accomplish this they often go to extremes from colorblindness to trying to label and classify people from other cultures by identifying their common characteristics. This serves to reinforce the stereotypes schools should be trying to dispel. She called for a movement away from lesson plan-centered teacher education programs to ones that are inquiry-centered and train pre-service teachers to become teacher researchers. A traditional lesson plan format assumes that everyone internalizes information the same way because it ignores the importance of context in teaching. In contrast, an inquiry-centered approach merges the experiences of the teacher and students as they construct knowledge together. Cochran-Smith (1995) asserted that the first step to understanding such an approach is to reconsider one's personal knowledge and experience, "[This] includes a close look at the tacit assumptions we make about the motivations and behaviors of other children, other parents, and other teachers, and about the pedagogies we deem most appropriate for learners who are like us or not like us" (p. 500).

Invisibility

This type of examination was inadvertently undertaken by a group of middle school teachers in a suburban St. Louis district whose population was roughly made up of five thousand students, twenty-five percent Black and seventy-percent White. Thirty-six percent of the Black students were bused in as part of a city desegregation plan. The teachers developed an action research project focused on improving the writing of their African-American students (Krater & Zeni, 1996). What started as a project centered on the writing itself, culminated in an awareness of the invisibility of both the students and the teachers as the teachers recognized that they were unable to see the strengths of their African-American male students. "Initially, when we looked at black male students in our classrooms, what we saw was a reflection of our own fears, assumptions and frustrations – along with the masks the kids themselves put up for protection" (p. 35). As they began to examine these assumptions, Krater, Zeni, and their colleagues recognized that they were losing the students they had the least in common with. It wasn't until they began to know their African-American students as individuals that the work of such students started to improve. The teachers recognized that they, too, had been invisible as they tried to be neutral and objective in their teaching. They poignantly came to realize that "an invisible teacher can't see her role in the problem" (p. 35).

Conflicting Values

Beyond the assumptions that teachers hold about students and families, are those that teachers hold about education itself. According to a recent study examining teacher experiences with culture and curriculum, cultures that receive immigrants tend to be unprepared to handle the types of issues that arise in schools. This is largely attributed to

the strong views about education that teachers bring to the profession. Often these views clash with those of the new families (Chan, 2006). Chan's work was based in a school in Toronto, Canada, a city she described as a welcoming community for immigrants. However, despite the school's focus on being culturally responsive, teachers found that parents didn't always support their activities, tensions among ethnic groups were high at some points, and students didn't want to share about their cultures, nor learn about those of their peers.

Chan (2006) described an incident regarding twenty-six out of seventy students who did not attend an overnight fieldtrip as an example of the disconnect between the values of parents and teachers. The teachers saw the field trip as an important part of the curriculum, while parents from a variety of cultures felt differently about it. Such differing beliefs often placed students in the middle between their family's values and the schools. As such, Chan asked, "What are the ethics in introducing beliefs and ideas, and engaging students to support these perceptions, when their parents would be opposed to them?" (p. 168). This question became particularly significant for the teachers in Chan's study in discussing the role of women in society. So often their view of women as equals conflicted with that of their students' parents. Brothers were allowed to attend field trips, while sisters had to remain at home. It was moments such as these that the teachers were unprepared to handle.

While Chan's (2006) concluding remarks, which center on the notion that our society continues to expect immigrants to adapt when we should be developing reciprocal relationships among different cultures, do not provide any new insights into discussions around creating more culturally relevant pedagogies, Chan raised an important question.

How should teachers accommodate for values that are so different from their own? Chan

stated, "When difference in perspective did not have an effect on practice, supporting

these differences did not challenge [a teacher's] beliefs, or involve high stakes" (p. 167).

It was when a teacher's professional values or expertise were called in question that

problems arose for them. The types of assumptions that teachers made went beyond

stereotyping particular ethnic groups. Chan (2006) challenged teachers to question the

very beliefs about education that serve to form the basis of the curricula that schools

implement.

Overrepresentation in Special Education

The extent of the harm that negative assumptions cause such as the personal ones

uncovered by Krater & Zeni (1996) and Chan (2006) are present in much scholarly work

focused on the impact of stereotypes and negative assumptions on minority populations.

Steele (1997) asserted that stereotypes and assumptions about minority students

contribute to their overrepresentation in special education programs. Based on the work

of Delpit (1995) and Irvine (1990), Meyer & Patton (2001) echoed this view, "Many

[teachers] have low expectations shaped by inaccurate assumptions about the innate

inability of racial minorities and poor children" (p. 6). They went on to assert that

overrepresentation is explained as something fixable through special education as the

problem lies within the child as opposed to a recognition that there are many factors

"outside the learner" that lead to academic, social, and emotional problems.

Hale (2001) described how teachers rarely acknowledged the cultural capital and

funds of knowledge of minority students, resulting in the negative stereotyping of

students as unsuccessful. As such, cultural diversity is seen as a "difference" or

"deviance" from the white norm, which leads to the perpetuation of cultural myths and ultimately the establishment of lower expectations for culturally "different" students (Meyer & Patton, 2001). Due to these inferior expectations, many ethnic groups have not learned to identify with academics, resulting in underachievement and lack of motivation (Meyer & Patton, 2001; Steele, 1997). As Meyer and Patton (2001) stated:

> We will continue to have problems with overrepresentation as long as we develop educational structures, systems, routines, and pedagogies without understanding more about how belief systems, biases, prejudices, and socioeconomic inequities that have existed for centuries in American society are played out and perpetuated in our nation's schools (p. 12).

Where these Four Bodies of Literature Intersect

The middle grades concept, as described above, is based on the notion that schooling for young adolescents needs to be developmentally appropriate. Central to this development is identity formation and with this the need to feel a sense of belonging. Therefore, if the middle grades concept is going to be applied to diverse groups of adolescents, in this case immigrant and refugee students, it is important for middle grades researchers to understand ethnic and cultural views on identity formation, particularly as they relate to the young adolescent years. Equally as important is the need to recognize the subtractive nature of our current educational system for many diverse populations and the ways in which teacher perspectives of students and education in general have the power to both negatively and positively affect said identify formation.

As cited above, the little we know about the middle school experiences of immigrant and refugee students generally relates to language acquisition and instructional

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strategies, but hasn't the literature shown that successful identity formation requires so much more? Even the studies that do exist tend to be focused on groups of immigrants or refugees from a single culture. My three-year ethnographic study documents the experiences of immigrant and refugee students in a multicultural/multilingual middle school whose stated vision is based on the Turning Points 2000 model. The experiences and words of my participants serve to help paint a picture of what negotiating the nuances of young adolescence as a recent immigrant is like. Chapter Three describes the research design and methodology I used to do this in detail.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Design and Methodology

Rationale for a Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research lends itself well to understanding unfamiliar situations and settings as its naturalistic focus "places no prior constraints on what the outcomes of the research will be" (Patton, 2002, p. 39). Given the purpose of this study, to describe the schooling experiences of a specific population of which I am not a part, utilizing a qualitative methodology allowed me to paint a more authentic and in-depth picture of my participants' school lives. Painting such a picture was particularly important in studying young adolescents, for middle grades research tends to focus on student voice and developmentally responsive schooling, or schooling geared to the developmental needs of its students (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005). As Cook-Sather (2002) stated:

> We as educators and educational researchers must seriously question the
>
> assumption that we know more than the young people of today about how they
>
> learn or what they need to learn in preparation for the decades ahead. It is time
>
> that we count students among those with the authority to participate both in the
>
> critique and reform of education (p. 3).

Giving students the authority to participate in the shaping of their education means giving students the authority to say what they want and need. This can only be fully accomplished when student responses are not limited through the use of categories previously defined by adults (Erickson & Schultz, 1992). The open-ended nature of qualitative research served this purpose throughout my study by providing an opportunity for my young adolescent participants to describe school in whatever terms they saw fit.

Utilizing an Ethnographic Perspective

Within the broad category of qualitative research sit a variety of specific methodologies, each catering to different purposes for conducting research. For this study I utilized an ethnographic approach to explore the schooling lives of immigrant and refugee middle level students for four distinct and equally important reasons. The first was the lack of existing research and knowledge on the population and individuals that served as the focus for this study. As I found it impossible to explain the schooling experiences of students I knew little to nothing about, my purpose was to describe and analyze what school was like for them, a significant distinction to make. Ethnographic research by its very nature is meant to describe, not explain or evaluate. Taylor (1993) stated, "To evaluate, we need to build description of children as they participate in the social construction of their own environments" (p. 26). My hope was that the description provided in this dissertation, collected through ethnographic methods, would frame further research that is explanatory or evaluative in nature.

My second reason for utilizing an ethnographic perspective was it provided a view of the multiple aspects of the students' lives as they experienced and described their educational settings. Such an approach was a good fit as through my research I hoped to understand the interrelationships of the different aspects of the students' educational lives that came together to form my research setting (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993; Patton, 2002; Zaharlick, 1992). As ethnographic methods dictate, I did not conduct the study as a means of answering specific questions about the students' experiences. My research questions were broad, allowing themes to unfold naturally. On the spectrum of qualitative methodologies, some of which focus on specific events, ideas, or phenomena, the

particularly open-ended, naturalistic nature of ethnography did not limit the variety or type of themes that emerged from my data (Zaharlick, 1992).

Two other goals of ethnographic research served to meet the needs of my study: describing how one's participants view what is happening to them (Taylor, 1993) and how these participants use adaptive mechanisms to actively participate in their environment (Gonzales, 2005; Ogbu, 1978; Willis, 1977). This first goal summarized a basic premise of ethnographic research that was reflected in the purpose of my study, to recognize that the schooling experiences of each of my participants differed even though they largely shared the same academic setting. As such I sought to describe a range of student experiences based on their individual perceptions of school. Included in this range of student experiences is the second goal described above, or the range of adaptive mechanisms the students used to participate in school. Gonzales (2005) described adaptive mechanisms as behaviors that represented students' responses to their school environment. Willis (1977) and Ogbu (1978) documented examples of such behavior in their own ethnographic studies through their discussions of "agency" and "cultural frame of reference" respectively. Recognition of these goals forced me to view things from different perspectives, exploring individual relationships as they were located within the larger social system of the school (Weiss, Dirks, Friedman, Hanly et al, 1998). Without a broader ethnographic lens students could be seen as passive recipients of knowledge and information without the ability to construct their own identities. The intensive observations inherent in ethnographic research allowed me to observe students for an extensive period of time, helping to get to know them more fully.

Finally, utilizing an ethnographic methodology increased my ability to help negate "cultural deficit" (Valencia, 1997) and "cultural difference" (Bhabha, 1995, Gonzalez, 2005; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992) models of understanding by examining the students' educational environments. Valencia (1997) described how deficit thinking describes minority students in terms of their shortcomings, as a result of language deficiency or low intelligence. 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" was also problematic in that it served to divide and categorize people (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). Such understandings of culture ignored both an examination of the relations of power that exist as part of the schooling culture (Levinson & Holland, 1996) for the immigrant and refugee students in this study. Difference is defined and justified based on where students are from as opposed to who they are as individuals. The power of the dominant culture to subordinate such students and force them to assimilate is thus overlooked. In other words, by using ethnographic methods to focus on the larger environment of the school and students' understanding and responses to this environment, I avoided providing a description of my immigrant and refugee participants' schooling experiences that ignored power dynamics and instead blamed them for their inability to "fit in" or "be successful" in school. The broader ethnographic lens used instead promoted a more holistic description of the students' school lives.

Selection and Description of Research Site

The following section provides an overview of the site chosen for my research. It locates the site within the northeastern state in which it is found and describes the ethnic

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diversity of the district's population. In addition, it offers an explanation of why this particular site was chosen. All proper names are pseudonyms in order 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. The school is located in the Riverview Educational Center, which is comprised of Riverview Elementary School and Riverview Middle/High School. The town of Riverview itself has a total population of approximately seven thousand.

During the period of this research, Riverview Middle School's student population of approximately 200 students reflected much diversity. About 16% of the district's student body was English Language Learners (three times the amount of any other district in the state), with 16 nationalities and 20 languages represented in the district. In recent years, Riverview's largely homogeneous French Canadian population was gradually displaced by one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the state. According to 2007 state data, students from minority groups made up about six percent of the state's student population, while almost sixteen percent of Riverview's student body in the same school year was members of minority groups. The low cost of living in Riverview compared to its neighboring communities and its designation as a refugee resettlement community were responsible for the attraction to the city of immigrant and refugee populations from all over the world. The majority of the school's immigrant and refugee students were in fact refugees who fled their homelands and resettled in Riverview through 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 very 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 which times. The original immigrant population that came to Riverview included students from Vietnam, then Bosnia. The next wave brought a variety of people from Africa including students from the Congo, Sudan and Somalia. The school anticipated the arrival of new Somali Bantu refugees within the next couple of years. The school also served students from other countries including China and Bolivia. 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. A small number of the 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. Both the school's handbook and website stated:

The [Riverview] Middle School is structured according to the Middle School design proposed in **Turning Points, 2000** [original emphasis]. In order to be a developmentally responsive middle school our educators are committed to young adolescents and share a common vision about adolescents and their learning. We have high expectations for all and arrange for an adult advocate for every student. We value family and community partnerships and work to create a positive learning climate throughout our school.

We accomplish these goals with a challenging integrative curriculum. We vary our teaching and learning practices and design assessments and evaluations that promote student learning. We support programs and policies that foster health, wellness and safety. And we provide comprehensive guidance and support services (2004).

In order to meet these objectives, Riverview Middle School's organizational structure was based on the assumption that "smaller is better" (Jackson & Davis, 2000), which manifested itself in middle schools in the organizational structure of teaming. Erb and Stevenson (1999) listed five important organizational elements that must exist for teaming to be successful (p. 50):

1) Teams must be small

2) Team and individual planning time for teachers must exist

3) Team teachers should be responsible for designing the team's schedule

4) Each team should have an area within the building

5) Students should remain on their team for multiple years

Teams are small systems, thus if any of these elements were not in place, the overall functioning of the team would suffer (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Figure 3.1 depicts Riverview's basic teaming structure. Team P.R.I.D.E is made up of the entire middle school administration, faculty, staff, and students. It serves as the unifying structure for the middle school. One Friday a month Team P.R.I.D.E gathers as an entire school community for Town Meeting. Members of each team serve on a Town Meeting Committee and are responsible for planning town meetings, which generally consist of teacher and student announcements, special recognitions such as the extra-curricular

accomplishments of students, and the monthly P.R.I.D.E. awards where students from each team are recognized for excelling in the areas of **P**atience, **R**espect, **I**nquiry, **D**esire, and **E**xcellence.
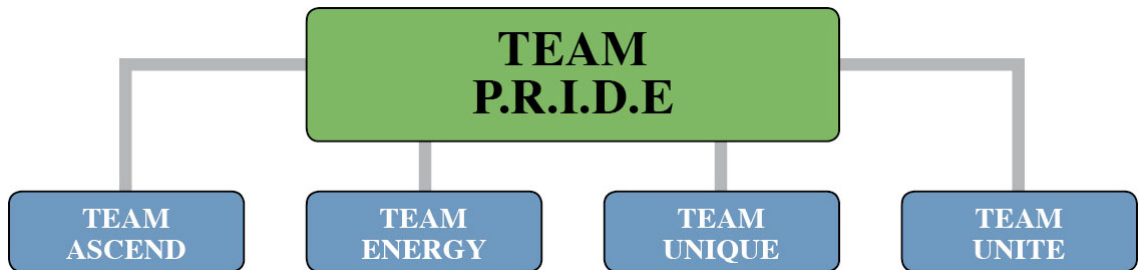
Figure 3.1: Basic Organization Structure of Riverview Middle School

Each of the four teams was considered a subsystem within Team P.R.I.D.E. Students were divided evenly among the three general education teams as sixth graders and remained on their team throughout grades 6-8. A fourth team (Team Unique) served the school's student population that for some reason or another was not successful on the other teams. The three regular education teams each consisted of three teachers and about forty-five students. The alternative team had two teachers and currently fourteen students. Each team had daily and weekly common planning time, and set its own schedule. The teams also each 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 teams of teachers generally shared common philosophies and were each structured a bit differently. Figure 3.2 represents the structure of teaching responsibilities on each team.

TEAM ASCEND

| LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER | SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHER | SCIENCE TEACHER |

MATH

TEAM UNITE

| LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER | SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHER | SCIENCE TEACHER |

MATH

TEAM ENERGY

| LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER | MATH TEACHER | SCIENCE TEACHER |

SOCIAL STUDIES

TEAM UNIQUE

| LANGUAGE ARTS / SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHER | SCIENCE / MATH TEACHER |
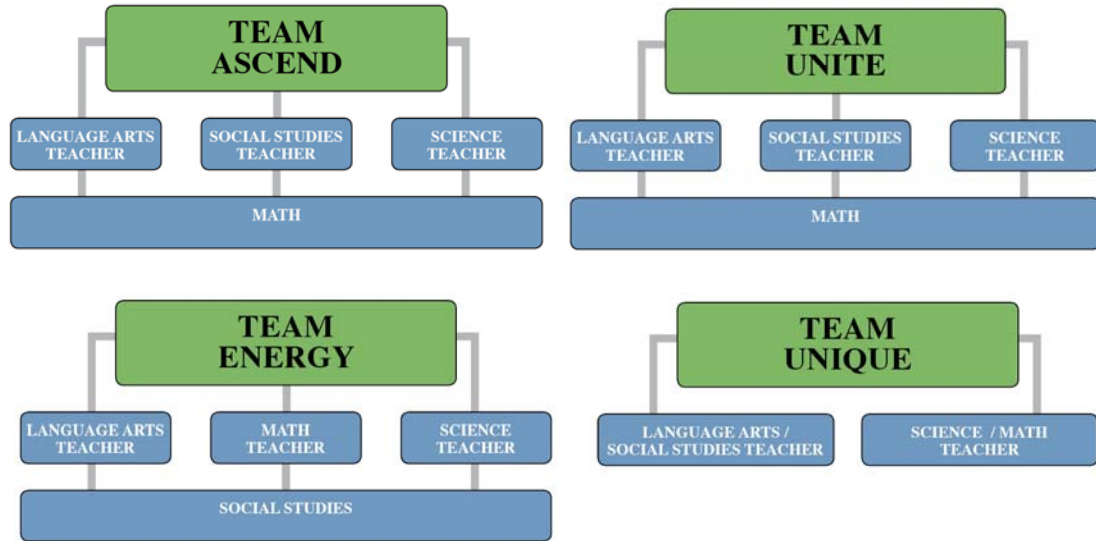
Figure 3.2: Organizational Teaching Structure of Each Team

While the division of teaching responsibilities of the three regular education teams was quite similar, Team Unique was structured so that both teachers taught together to better meet the needs of its students.

The above information described three very important aspects of Riverview Middle School that made it an ideal site for my research. The first was that the large percentage of immigrant/refugee students in the school allowed me to describe multiple perspectives of their schooling experiences. I was able to examine how the students each viewed and internalized the same school conditions uniquely. In addition, the small size of the school and its community allowed me to more intimately access and understand the lives of my participants. Finally, the school's philosophy and structure, rooted in the middle grades reform movement, provided a setting in which to examine the ways such structures contribute to the cultural meanings made by the immigrant and refugee students.

Description of Participants

Upon entering Riverview Middle School to conduct research, a place where I had previously worked with pre-service teachers, I negotiated access to the entire school for observation and informal interviews. One hundred percent of the school's faculty of sixteen agreed to allow me to wander in and out of their classrooms as needed. In addition to this, I sent an IRB approved consent form home with all of the students in the middle school ELL program and based on the returned consents identified fourteen students to interview formally and shadow for a full day. According to Patton (2002):

> When selecting a sample of great diversity, the data collection and analysis will yield two kinds of findings: (1) high quality, detailed descriptions of each case, which are useful for documenting uniqueness, and (2) important shared patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity (p. 235).

As the goal of my study was to present such findings, I chose to use a maximum variation sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) to select these fourteen students (see Table 3.1). Of the fourteen, nine were males and five were females. In terms of country of origin, three were from Somalia, one from the Congo, six were Bosnian, and four were Vietnamese. They varied in terms of the length of time they had been in the United States with one year being the shortest amount of time and ten 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 varied. This variety was important as DeVos and Orozco (1990) stressed that different ethnic groups in the same setting are subjected to different attitudes from the dominant culture. In addition, the immigration experiences of boys and

girls are often very different (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). The lack of such

diversity in my sample would have proven to ignore these important theories and

potentially misrepresent the data. All school personnel who volunteered were also

formally interviewed. Those who did were eight classroom teachers, an ELL teacher, a

special educator, and the school principal.

Table 3.1: Description of Student Participants

Gender	Country of Origin	Years in United States	Attended other Schools in the US	Riverview Team	Years in Study
Female	Bosnia	9	Yes	Energy & Unique	3
Male	Bosnia	7	No	Unite	3
Male	Bosnia	1	No	Ascend	2
Female	Bosnia	2	No	Ascend	2
Male	Bosnia	7	Yes	Ascend	1
Male	Bosnia	4	No	Ascend	2
Male	Congo	8	Yes	Ascend & Unique	3
Female	Somalia	5	Yes	Ascend	1
Male	Somalia	5	Yes	Ascend	2
Male	Somalia	2	No	Ascend	2
Female	Vietnam	7	No	Unite	3
Male	Vietnam	8	No	Energy	3
Female	Vietnam	2	No	Ascend	2
Male	Vietnam	4	No	Unite	2

Data Collection

    Length of Time

What often separates ethnographic observations from those of other

methodologies is the length of time the researcher spends in the field. Ethnographic

fieldwork tends to be prolonged, with usually a minimum of a year spent in direct contact

with participants. However, multi-year studies are common (Zaharlick, 1992) for a

variety of reasons. The first, and perhaps most significant reason for prolonged

ethnographic fieldwork, is that it is not as vulnerable to misinterpretation and

miscommunication (Patton, 2002) given the reasons described above. The second is that

attitudes and activities change over time (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993). This was

particularly important for this study, which spanned three school years. It began when the

youngest participants were in sixth grade and ended during their eighth grade year. The

three year period allowed me to see how students perceived their schooling as they

matured age wise and developmentally. It also provided me with data to describe whether

students saw their experiences with teachers and students changing over time or whether

they remained the same.

The final reason relates to the amount of time it takes for a researcher to gain trust

in her participants. This length of time is critical in creating social relationships with

those being studied (Zaharlick, 1992). These relationships help create a rapport that more

easily opens up participants to share things they might not otherwise feel comfortable

sharing (Weiss et al., 1998). Thus, gaining access is of utmost importance in conducting

an ethnographic study. As Hammersley & Atkinson (1993) stated:

> Many hosts have highly inaccurate, and lurid, expectations of the research
>
> enterprise, especially of ethnographic work. Two closely related models of the
>
> researcher tend to predominate in this context, 'the expert' and 'the critic'. Both
>
> images can conspire to make the gatekeeper uneasy as to the likely consequences
>
> of the research, and the effects of its conduct (p. 75).

Thus, two types of relationships were critical to the successful implementation of this

study. The first were those with the students themselves. As hierarchical relationships

exist within any culture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993), the school setting is no

different. As an adult, students began by automatically equating me as being in a position of authority. Their actions and speech were refined in my presence, giving me a skewed picture of their lived experiences. Although this was inevitable in many respects, it became increasingly important to present myself to the students as someone who, unlike a teacher, was not an expert and did not have the authority to judge their words and actions. However, just as critical was my need to develop a relationship with students that recognized the difference between friendship and rapport. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) described three dangers in not maintaining this distinction; sample bias, loss of objectivity, and over-identification or going native.

My speech, body language, and facial expressions were critical in accomplishing this goal. The extended period of time I spent at Riverview Middle School allowed me to accomplish this in a variety of ways. I began getting to know the students by asking a lot of questions as I observed and answering the questions they had about me. Initially they were understandably tentative, but a series of "tests" helped build their trust in me. The first "test" of my position was within the third week of my observations. I arrived in the ELL class prior to the teacher, leaving me alone with the students. Immediately they began cursing and roughhousing. Within five minutes a couple of students were standing on tables and another had a chair raised above his head. Both ignoring me and staring me down at the same time, the students were obviously waiting for me to respond as any adult would. However, when I just sat there, saying and doing nothing, the students ultimately looked at each other and said, "I guess you're not a teacher." After that they were able to open up to me and accept me more. Small tests continued with individual students who would criticize a teacher or curse in my presence and then wait silently for a

response. They learned that my response to such things was simply to ask why they felt a certain way instead of responding negatively, thus their behavior consistently became friendlier and more open. As mentioned previously, this openness evolved over time and as the years went by the "testing" slowly diminished. (A further description of power dynamics and roles is presented in a later section of this chapter).

I also needed to build relationships with teachers and staff members. For without gaining access to their classrooms and knowledge, there would have been no field in which to collect my data. The teachers as well as the students needed to understand that I was neither 'the expert' nor 'the critic' there to point out what they were doing wrong. Instead I was there to record the daily realities of their work in order for them, others and me to learn from it. My relationships with staff members differed largely and ranged from those who ignored my presence in the back of the classrooms to those who asked me to actively participate in their lessons.

Participant Observation and Subjectivity

Firsthand, long-term, participant observations are at the center of ethnographic research (Patton, 2002). Participant observation was defined by Patton (2002) as, "…being fully engaged in experiencing the setting (participation) while at the same time observing and talking with other participants about whatever is happening" (pp.265-266). It allowed me to see the behavior of my participants outside of an interview situation. My observations occurred two to four days a week, excluding school vacations, during the school day for the three-year period. In addition, I attended periodic after-school functions including potluck dinners, school plays, and athletic events, as they related to my research. My observations began only in the ELL classroom for the first few months

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as I got to know the students in a smaller environment. I then moved into their regular education classes, included things such as art, band, and lunch, and finally I ended my observations with a full shadow day of eight of the fourteen participants.

My level of participation during observation sessions varied greatly depending on the classroom, teacher, and students I was with at the time. In some instances I was simply an observer taking notes in the back of the room. At other times I worked with students one on one in the classroom, assisted with whole class activities, or helped students with homework during study hall time and after school. In addition, I spent many hours eating lunch with students in the cafeteria.

In other words, I found myself in many roles throughout the three-year period: researcher, teacher, friend, colleague, and peer. While more traditional ethnographers may question my subjectivity in taking on so many roles, others recognize its importance. Rosaldo (1989) stated, "…social analysts should explore their subjects from a number of positions, rather than being locked into any particular one" (p. 169). This statement continually rang true for me throughout my data collection as each role I took on helped me to understand the students' experiences in a new way. For example, there were times when sitting in the back of the classroom allowed me to have a broader look at the students' responses to an activity in relation to the rest of the class. Other times I learned more by sitting one on one with a student, helping them complete an assigned task. This more focused observation helped me to more closely picture what about the task the student found challenging, easy, liked and disliked. Each role I took provided me with a new lens into the students' schooling experiences.

Beyond the various roles I took on throughout my study, from the moment that I decided that I wanted to examine the schooling experiences of immigrant and refugee students, I had concerns about my role as researcher. Any type of research, but particularly ethnographic research, is prone to subjectivity and bias. Due to this, I constantly worried throughout the research process about my ability to accurately portray the experiences of a group of individuals whose lives were so different from mine. I knew, as DeStigter (2001) stated about his own work, "…that I must cross *la frontera* into another world that was, in many ways, far away from my own" (p. 2). What made my situation unique from that of other researchers, however, was the fact that my participants also came from such differing backgrounds and prior experiences. In this way, the similarities and differences that I shared with them varied greatly by individual. The following words of Valdes (1996) rang true for me, "…it was apparent that I was quite different, and while I neither hid nor advertised these differences, I suspect that they were in some ways obvious…I tried simply to present myself as who I was then" (pp. 11-12). The constant differences included my status as an adult, former teacher (roles discussed in the previous section) and university position, although this last role seemed to have more of an impact on the adults in the school than on the students themselves (also as mentioned in a prior section). For those students whose parents were college educated, this position meant little. However, I became a resource for the students who were unfamiliar with academia and who wanted to ultimately enter college. They asked questions about things such school work, life on campus, professors, and the admissions process.

But my differences with the students went well beyond my university status. I could not deny that my race, White, compared in particular with the African and Vietnamese students, provided me with a privileged existence, not shared by my participants. I was never called names or looked at funny by my peers because of the color of my skin, nor could I pretend to imagine what that felt like. While I moved every three or four years as a child and adolescent, as most of the students in this study, (a similarity that proved to be an important connecting point between the students and myself), the reasons for my family's mobility were quite different and I could blend in wherever I went. The inability of many of these students to do so struck me regularly. Beyond the Bosnian students, who shared the same color skin as their native-born peers, this was the case for most.

I was also lucky enough to be born into a privileged family, financially, and my middle school years were relatively carefree. I would baby-sit on occasion, as your stereotypical female American teenager did, but it was not out of necessity. The young adolescents that I describe in this study, for the most part, came from working class families. While many of them enjoyed a more privileged lifestyle in their country of origin, that all changed when they came to the United States. Most rented apartments filled with extended family where they shared a bedroom with siblings, cousins, or grandparents. Many also had after school jobs, some for pay, while others provided free childcare for younger siblings and cousins at all hours of the day or night. Hearing of the many obligations the students had beyond those of a "typical" adolescent, served as another constant reminder of how different their lives were from what mine had been.

What served me well in interacting with the students was the fact that my prior teaching career had been in a largely working class area.

I do believe that my ignorance was an advantage in one very particular way. The audience that I am trying to reach is people like me, people who have had little experience and training in working with immigrant and refugee students. Some of these people will be working with immigrants and refugees by choice and will seek out the information from experts while countless others may be forced by changing community dynamics to step out of their comfort zones. It is to these teachers that my ignorance at the beginning of this project will hopefully appeal.

In addition to my background, I do have specific biases in terms of what I view the role of schooling to be, which certainly influence my observations of the schooling experiences described in my study. For me, education is meant to aid in the holistic development of children and in the case of young adolescents must cater to their intellectual, social, emotional, and physical needs. I am certainly aware that not all people believe this to be true, making it particularly important to disclose upfront.

Finally, it is evident that my motives for exploring this topic stem from my own failures and concerns about the ways I was unable to serve a specific student's needs. I am using my own experience to make the generalization that there are a number of teachers across the country (perhaps a majority) in predominantly Caucasian areas in the same position that as I was and that there are a lot of students out there whom our public education system is failing because of this.

Given all of this, in order to document my subjectivity as well as my observer bias (Brodkey, 1987), I kept a recorded reflective journal. This journal, which I carried with

me whenever I was in the field, provided a place for me to document my own feelings and assumptions in order to keep them separate from other forms of data. This journal was transcribed with my field notes, allowing me to see the two side by side during analysis as a consistent reminder of the need to separate my opinions and assumptions from those of my participants.

Interviews and Document Review

Taylor (1993) cautioned that the observations we make about children could only lead to "tentative interpretations" about their lives. She stressed the need to talk to children, listen to them, and then try to determine what's important to them in their everyday lives. With this in mind, interviews became an increasingly important part of my data collection process. Once I established a relationship with the students through my time spent in their ELL classes, I began a series of individual interviews to listen as they described their schooling experiences.

According to Patton (2002), "The purpose of interviewing…is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective…We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, to gather their stories" (p. 341). As such, two sets of stories were important for me to hear, those from the perspective of students and those from the perspective of school personnel. According to Hammersley & Atkinson (1993), what separated ethnographic interviewing from other methodologies was that:

> Ethnographers do not decide beforehand the questions they want to ask, though they may enter the interview with a list of issues to be covered. Nor do ethnographers restrict themselves to a single mode of questioning. On different occasions, or at different points in the same interview, the approach may be non-

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directive or directive, depending on the function that the questioning is intended

to serve (p. 113).

Given this, I created an interview protocol that listed the topics the interviews addressed, along with potential probes to spur the students' thinking. However, the questions were open-ended, leaving room for students to share whatever they personally found significant or insignificant in regards to school.

As my data collection drew to a close, a second set of formal interviews was conducted with the students. Protocols for this interview were created based on the initial protocol, previously collected interview data, as well as issues that emerged during observations. Given this, these interviews were more individualized in nature, depending on the student and how long he/she had participated in the study. Often they were used as a chance for students to clarify or expand upon ideas discussed in their original interviews or during subsequent informal conversations. These interviews were often more reflective in nature. I 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. Overall, knowing and trusting me more, I also found that students opened up more about their families and emotions in general during these final interviews than in their original ones.

In addition to these formal interviews, inherent in the ethnographic process is also the need for informal, conversational interviews throughout the period of data collection. According to Patton (2002), "the conversational interview offers maximum flexibility to pursue information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate, depending on what

emerges from observing a particular setting or from talking with one or more individuals in that setting" (p. 342). Such interviews were an ongoing occurrence throughout data collection and served to focus both my observation and interviews. Data from these interviews were recorded and served a major role in both data analysis and triangulation.

Data Analysis

My data analysis relied on an interactive-reactive approach (Zaharlick, 1992), where analysis occurs throughout the study, not just at the end. As Glesne (1999) stated, "Data analysis done simultaneously with data collection enables you to focus and shape the study as it proceeds" (p. 130). Keeping a reflective log using a hand-held tape recorder served to record my analytic thoughts as they occurred.

Another way to accomplish this involved preliminarily coding my data immediately after it was collected. This was done with my observation data using a framework that I developed based on the work of Green, Harker, and Golden (1986), and utilized by Taylor (1993), which viewed the lessons that teachers present to their students as central to an understanding of classroom life. Taylor (1993) stated, "Lessons must be viewed as jointly constructed events" (p.17). She utilized the five frames developed by Green et al. (1986) to organize observation data from classroom lessons. I used the same frames as a preliminary coding tool for my observation data.

The following provides a brief description of each frame. The first was the personal frame or what individuals brought to class. Data related to the academic information being constructed were divided into the second frame. Third was the social frame, which contained data involving expectations around participation and involvement. The fourth, or instructional frame, contained data centered on the

instructional strategies used to present lessons. The final frame, or material frame, included data that pertained to the form and content of the materials used to present information.

After each observation occurred, the data were divided into these frames and preliminarily coded for emergent themes. Both formal and informal interview data, as well as student drawings and other documents were also preliminarily coded immediately. I utilized Glesne's (1999) recommendation of creating monthly reports, "In the early days of data collection, coding can help you to develop a more specific focus or more relevant questions" (p. 133). The emerging themes in these monthly reports helped serve to prompt specific interviews and questions as the research developed.

Glesne (1999) described coding as "a progressive process of sorting and defining and defining and sorting those scraps of paper that are applicable to your research process" (p. 135). As such, my later data analysis involved using initial themes to create "major code clumps" in which to sort my interview data. I divided these clumps into sub codes until I was able to make meaning from the data. The sub codes that I developed from the interview data were then cross-referenced with the observation data frames. As the purpose of my research was to describe the schooling experiences of the students from their own perspectives, I utilized my reflective journals and removed the observation data from the frames that were irrelevant to student data and developed new frames to support the student data. This collecting and coding process continued until I reached "theoretical saturation" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glesne, 1999).

Limitations

As with any study, limitations existed in this one. The first was my inability to include some students due to a lack of available translators. This has resulted in keeping some students' perspectives out of the data and findings. In addition, my research design did not include contact with parents, preventing me from seeing and understanding my participants from this important point of view. Finally, the transient nature of the population resulted in the consistent subtraction and addition of students to the study.

Trustworthiness

Two important features of my study helped to highlight the trustworthiness of my findings. The first was the thick description that resulted from spending three years in the field. As cited numerous times in this chapter, the extensive length of my fieldwork was key to the success of this study. In addition, three methods of triangulation were utilized. First, I employed multiple methods of data collection as previously described. I used participant observation accompanied by formal and informal student interviews to support or negate my own observations. Teachers, administrators, and other staff members were also interviewed as a means of triangulating student opinions and perceptions. A document analysis involving the collection of student work, teacher handouts, and school and district data also provided me with information with which to check my findings. Finally, my reflective journal was used to keep my own biases and opinions out of the findings. The second method of triangulation involved the students being formally interviewed twice in the three-year period, increasing their opportunity to share their perspectives of their schooling experiences. The final method of triangulation

was the sharing of interview transcripts with participants, which allowed them to clarify their thoughts, lessoning the chance for them to be misrepresented.

Introduction to the Final Two Chapters

The following two chapters provide a summary of my research findings and their implications. The first represents my work in the form of a scholarly article, which has been submitted for publication. The findings described in this article center on my participants' perceptions of the their experiences as students and teachers on multiage teams at Riverview Middle School. Implications involve the development of an appropriate school environment for immigrant and refugee young adolescents. The final chapter summarizes the broader range of findings and implications that evolved from my three years in the field.

CHAPTER FOUR

Scholarly Article

"I feel like I'm safe again": A discussion of middle grades organizational   structures
from the perspective of immigrant youth and their teachers.

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, ten to fourteen year olds, entering this

nation's middle schools is continuing to grow more diverse. One subpopulation that adds

to this diversity is made up of immigrant children. Over 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" (Landale & Oropesa, 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 2.84 million foreign-born United

States residents under the age of eighteen (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). However, little

research centered on the schooling experiences of immigrant youth exists even today.

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, and Suarez-Orozco, 2007; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco,

2001). While Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) 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 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, 2001, 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 far 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) shared this critique of middle grades literature by noting the hegemony of a movement centered on a white, middle class, male perception of identity. Given that today's growing numbers of middle grades educators must not only continue to support their students as they experience the nuances of young adolescence, but also 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 (1995) 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). In order to guide students in the way Igoa described, we need to understand more about the experiences of immigrant students in our nation's middle schools.

Given such critiques, the research presented here utilizes 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 the students and

teachers' perceptions demonstrate that such structures serve to accomplish for immigrant

students what their intended purpose is- to provide a positive schooling experience,

devoted to democratic principles, that takes the unique needs of its students into

consideration? In asking these questions I hope to accomplish 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 on the experiences of immigrant children in schools**.** This

provided an overview of what middle level educators should understand in order to serve

their immigrant students. I then considered this research while exploring the literature on

middle level organizational practices. What combining these two bodies of literature

showed was the potential for middle grades organizational supports to help schools meet

the needs of immigrant students.

Schooling of Immigrant Youth

The following section describes current literature that highlights areas that impact

the schooling of immigrant youth; transitioning challenges, language proficiency, school

cultural norms, and the need for a safe space.

Transitioning Challenges

The social services literature related to immigrant youth discusses 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, I cannot ignore its tendency to be subtractive in nature. Within it, immigrants were generally described as having something to overcome, an attitude which serves to uphold the dominant power structure. This is in contrast to my 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, 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, 2007, p. 4) were 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.

Language Proficiency

Many immigrant students were also described as lacking proficiency with the English language. In their analysis of interview data of over 100 immigrant youth, Gaytan, Carhill, & 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 (1995) 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.

School Cultural Norms

"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 a culture shock upon entering their new schools. Among other things, this culture shock often led to shyness. Igoa (1995) 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 (1995), 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 community.

A Safe Space

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 different without worrying about what others thought of them. She described how because of this students did not feel shame or reluctance to speak while in the Center.

Without this safe environment, Igoa (1995) explained that her idea of "dialogic intervention," which "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 were often concrete and literal, preventing them from recognizing that there were multiple ways of seeing things. Dialogic intervention involved the students being comfortable enough with their teacher that he could 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, which 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

The literature on the two middle grades organizational practices that follow, teaming and multiage grouping, highlight many benefits for students.

Teaming

Teaming is an organizational practice that involves dividing students into smaller units, each served by a particular group of teachers. The purpose of this 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 main content areas and around eighty students, research does point to the benefits of smaller partner teams (see Bishop & Allen-Malley, 2004; Bishop & Stevenson, 2000). Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall (2001) said of teaming, "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 age group as relationships form the backbone of a young adolescent's education. They described how an adolescent's need for close relationships and the 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 adolescents. Besides infancy, adolescents grow and develop at a faster rate than any other period in human development. Thus, providing an environment that allowed young adolescents to form close personal ties with their peers and adults gives them a more enhanced capacity for learning.

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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 (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000a) had positive results in student performance. 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, & Mulhall (2000b) of the Michigan Middle Start schools, schools exhibited an improved work climate, more frequent contact with parents, increased teacher job satisfaction, along with higher levels of student achievement. These results helped prove that effective teaming does have a strong impact on overall student development.

Multiage Grouping

Multiage grouping 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 & Stimpson (1996) as cited by the National Middle School Association (NMSA) (2007), only five percent of students in the United States are schooled in multiage classrooms, and the great majority of these are in elementary schools. These low numbers were cited for the lack of research on the effectiveness of this practice (NMSA, 2007).

However, research has illuminated benefits to multiage grouping, which centered on student emotional and social growth. Veenman (1995) described how multiage

classrooms led to higher feelings of belonging and confidence for students since 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, Stight, & 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 when implemented (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 like they were part of a community while at the same time working to develop their own personal identity. Given this, it seems that teaming has much potential for providing immigrant and refugee young adolescents with the safe space they need to feel comfortable with who they are and receive the supports they need. Igoa (1995) developed this safe space outside of the traditional classroom and I am suggesting that at the very least middle grades organizational structures could help ease the transition from that ELL space into the mainstream classroom.

The safety and comfort of the middle grades team could even be increased for immigrant and refugee students if multiyear and/or multiage teaming were put into practice. Igoa (1995) described how the development of her students could not be rushed; that they must first feel safe before they would express themselves. She stressed how because of this many immigrants went through a silent stage and needed to be nurtured out of it. Switching them from class to class slowed this process down. In a multiyear

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setting yearly transitions would be 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 & 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 their own age increases. On a team comprised of fifth through eighth graders, for example, a fourteen year old refugee student could spend time both with eighth grade students her own age and with fifth grade students who have similar academic needs to her. This could alleviate anxiety around feeling even more different than one already would if placed in a traditional fifth grade class at the age of fourteen.

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

Methodology

Utilizing Ethnographic Methods

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 during their eighth grade year. The three year period allowed me to see how students perceived their schooling as they matured age wise and developmentally. It also

provided me with data to describe whether students saw their experiences with teachers and students as changing over time.

Selection and Description of Research Site

All proper names are pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of participants. Riverview Middle School was 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 reflected much diversity. About 16% of the district's student body was English Language Learners (three times the amount of any other district in the state), with sixteen nationalities and twenty 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 the attraction to the city of immigrant and refugee populations from all over the world. The majority of the school's immigrant and refugee students were in fact refugees who fled their homelands and resettled in Riverview through 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 very 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 which times. The original immigrant population that came to Riverview 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

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months while others settled into the community for years. A small number of the 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, Turning Points 2000 (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Students were divided evenly among three general education teams as sixth graders and remained on their team throughout grade eight. A fourth team served the school's student population that for some reason or another was not successful on the other teams. The three regular education teams each consisted of three teachers and approximately forty-five students. The alternative team had two teachers and around fifteen students. Each team had daily and weekly common planning time, and set its own schedule. The teams also each 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 teams of teachers generally shared common philosophies.

Description of Participants

One hundred percent of the school's approximately twenty faculty members agreed to allow me access to their classrooms for general observations. In addition, I identified fourteen students to interview formally and shadow for a full day. I chose to use a maximum variation sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) to select these fourteen students. Of the fourteen, nine were males and five were females. In terms of country of origin, three were from Somalia, one from the Congo, six were Bosnian, and four were Vietnamese. They varied in terms of the length of time they had been in the United States

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with one year being the shortest amount of time and ten 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 varied. All school personnel who

volunteered were also formally interviewed. Those who did were eight classroom

teachers, an ELL teacher, a special educator, and the school principal.

Data Collection

Firsthand, long-term, participant observations allowed me to see the behavior of

my participants outside of an interview situation. My observations occurred two to four

days a week, excluding school vacations, during the school day for the three-year period.

In addition, I attended periodic after-school functions including potluck dinners, school

plays, and athletic events, as they related to my research. My observations began only in

the ELL classroom for the first few months as I got to know the students in a smaller

environment. I then moved into their regular education classes, including extra-

curriculars such as art, band, and lunch, and finally I ended my observations with a full

shadow day of eight of the fourteen participants.

My first set of interview protocols for both teachers and students listed the topics

the interviews addressed along with potential probes to spur the students' thinking.

However, the questions were open-ended, leaving room for participants to share whatever

they personally found significant or insignificant in regards to school. As my 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. I 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

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

Data Analysis

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

Discussion of Findings

The findings described here were divided into five categories; teaming benefits for immigrant students, multiyear benefits for immigrant students, multiage benefits for immigrant students, multiyear, multiage teaming benefits for teachers, and the shortcomings of Riverview's organizational structure. A description and discussion of each follows.

Teaming: Benefits for Immigrant and Refugee Students

Throughout my three years in the field, both students and teachers shared numerous thoughts on the benefits of teaming for immigrant and refugee students. Small size, consistency, community, and helpfulness are the four themes that emerged from this data.

Small Size

All of the students I 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 who had trouble articulating why 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 fifteen 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 student quotations above was consistent throughout my student interviews. It also relates to my next theme, consistency.

Consistency

Comments made by students, such as those above, 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 sums 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 did reference the different rules that were consistent across all of their team teachers. They liked that items such as not being able to chew gum and not being allowed to touch anyone were the same regardless of which classroom on their team they were in. An examination of students' sense of pride about topics such as team rules lead to the development of community as my third theme.

Community

The theme of community emerged directly from the words of a student. When asked what she thought about teaming, she 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 is 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 through aiding in the community development process. Many of the students interviewed made reference to their team's name and defined its significance for me. In addition, many referenced specific activities that set their team apart from the others, "Yea [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 their Friday team meetings, describing how it was a time for students and teachers to talk about their

team and what their current theme was. The structure of this particular team was such that traditional social studies class was replaced by theme time where 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 for 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. The final theme, helpfulness, seemed to be a direct result of this relationship building.

Helpfulness

"On teams people try harder to help each other and not be strangers." This sentiment was again shared by many of my 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 I 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 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 full sixth through eighth grade experience[1]. For the majority of the students in my study this proved to be a wonderful thing. 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 they benefited from remaining with their team for three years; lack of shyness and fewer transitions.

Lack of Shyness

Student comments such as "You don't get shy every year" and "Last year she was scary to me [but now she's not]" spoke to 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 my study shared similar feelings with me. The overcoming of shyness extended to feeling comfortable with both peers and teachers. One student described how his grades increased during his seventh grade year because he was more comfortable with one of his

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[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.

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 they saw was that each year brought new sixth graders to the team, meaning that the immigrant and refugee students were never the only new kids who were 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 significant point in their utilization of the shared experience of being new 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 where they might not have if they were required to transition to a new environment every year.

Fewer Transitions

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

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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 echoed the perspective of many students

expressed above who may not have spoken about transitions specifically, 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; shared experiences and the erasing of traditional grade

lines, while the students all shared one; having a mixture of friends.

Shared Experiences

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 quote also 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 or

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.

Erase Traditional Grade Lines

Two ideas encompassed this subtheme. The first was that teachers found it helpful

for academics 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 meeting goals

they were not yet prepared for. The second was the school's ability to place high school

aged students who were not ready for high school in the middle school. The mixture of

ages already present in the middle school helped to mask this from peers and alleviate

some social stigmatization.

Multiyear, Multiage Teaming: Benefits for Teachers

According to Hackmann, Petzko, Valentine, Clark, Nori, & Lucas (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 that I interviewed 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, they responded overwhelmingly positively. Multiple perspectives and progress monitoring were cited as the two major benefits for teachers serving a diverse population of students.

Multiple Perspectives

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 other's don't, which is helpful." This reference to strong communication was important to note as communication was described as a critical component of successful teaming in the literature.

Progress Monitoring

Many teachers spoke generally of this advantage for all kids. One teacher made this statement, "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 it 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 provided 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, my observations and interviews illuminated some major shortcomings for immigrants and refugees, which include; the friendship dilemma, downsides of multiage teaming, teacher perspectives of diversity, and parent involvement.

The Friendship Dilemma

The one complaint shared by all fourteen student participants, and the only 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 over 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

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minority in the school[2] this was more problematic. They were the only students in a class or team who were immigrants, spoke a certain language or who looked a certain way, and this proved to be socially challenging for many. Often I served as the sole lunch companion for a few of the students in this situation and I became aware of the acute loneliness of these students as I stood back and observed from afar. 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 with native speakers of English immediately.

There seemed to be two main reasons that some immigrant students ended up alone in classes and/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 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; 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.

Downsides to Multiage Teaming

Although students and teachers generally spoke positively about the multiage aspect of their teams, enough students spoke ill of the practice that their comments were worth reporting here. As with other shared themes many students made vague remarks

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

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 is 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.

Parent Involvement

Early on in my 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 proved to be a bit out of touch with the feelings of his teachers and their immigrant students. Improved parent communication and involvement was not referenced even once as benefits to Riverview's teaming structure beyond this initial statement in either my formal or informal interviews with teachers. When asked

specifically about parent involvement, teachers instead expressed concern about how lacking it often was with immigrant parents.

Teaming, Teacher Perspectives, and Diversity

"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 my research demonstrated that teachers who were uncomfortable and/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' teachers' perspectives on immigrant and refugee learners. One team relied heavily on a push-in model where the ELL teacher would largely support the classroom teachers in their regular classes. Students on this team were slowly weaned off heavy ELL classes until they were totally mainstreamed.

The other extreme involved a team where most ELL students, regardless of length of time in the country or country of origin, were pulled out for the core academic classes. During math class, although not pulled out, the ELL students sat removed from everyone else with an instructional assistant the entire time. These same students even sat in the back of the room instead of participating in advisory time since 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 them as they sat in the back of the room. So, while the immigrant student who was considered academically on par with her classmates

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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.

My observations correlated with 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 some way or another all teachers spoke of the need for more training around diversity and 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 in this area 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 all 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. As I demonstrated here, the middle grades structures utilized 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 re-examined. By not acknowledging the differences of immigrant and refugee students, you are rendering them invisible. Without a doubt there were features of Riverview's organizational structure that resulted in negative consequences for its immigrant and refugee students. I argue that while multiage teaming in general offered many benefits to Riverview's immigrants, these advantages could be

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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

When I shared my research questions at the beginning of this piece, I spoke of my desire to learn whether the organization structures at Riverview Middle School provided a positive environment for immigrant students devoted to democratic principles and students' unique needs. By this, I meant that I primarily wanted to know 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. The data was generally positive, but did show mixed results in all of these areas.

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 that they were a part of 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 that 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 where helpfulness and asking for 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 in order to promote an educational experience based on the whole child. Finally, the multiage/year 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 the democratic principle of spreading diversity across the school was actually detrimental. Fong (2007) described the invisibility that immigrant students often felt they must overcome and this was the case at Riverview for the students who were placed on the team that promoted a pull-out ELL program. As these students were largely out of the classroom for academic classes and/or seated separately in the back of the room, they did not have the opportunity to participate as equal members on the team. In addition, students who were separated from those who shared the same native language as them were forced to leave this language behind during the school day, silencing a part of their identity (Igoa, 1995) and for newcomers their voice entirely. Finally, the organizational structures at Riverview Middle School were not seen as promoting successful family/school partnerships.

For Educators and Policy Makers

Immigrant students need a safe space where they can have a voice, as well as learn to and feel comfortable advocating for themselves. My research showed that the practice of organizing middle schools into smaller units, or teams, helped provide such an environment for immigrant students. I would recommend that middle schools in multilingual/multicultural settings explore organizational ways to recreate the familial atmosphere present for many immigrants at Riverview Middle School. Beyond teaming, advisory, a middle grades practice that supports community and promotes the needs for every student in a school to have an adult she can turn to (Jackson & Davis, 2000), is another organizational structure that has the potential to promote the type of environment the participants in my study describe as making school a positive place for them.

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

I also suggest that schools serving immigrant students examine their grouping practices more closely. The practice of distributing diverse groups of students across teams or classes was perceived by immigrant students as negatively influencing their

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ability to make friends. While peer relationships are important for the identify formation of all young adolescents, they are critically significant for immigrant students. Igoa (1995) described seven reasons for this: teachers ultimately stay behind but friends move on with students, friends help ease isolation and fear, they stimulate learning, they stimulate oral language development, they teach reading, friends act as counselors, and they help validate immigrant students. Therefore, schools need to make some very intentional decisions about grouping in relation to immigrants.

For Research

It is imperative to recognize students as stakeholders in educational reform. As such, they need to be, and are more than capable of being, invited to participate in the dialogue about the future of their education. The thoughtful comments that the fourteen middle grades students in my study made both formally and informally demonstrate the ability and importance of young adolescents to offer their perspective on 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 can serve to promote the type of dialogic intervention (Igoa, 1995) that immigrant students often need to help view themselves in a positive light.

More research related to immigrant and refugee middle grades students needs to be undertaken in order to shed light on some of the issues that surfaced here. One topic of inquiry should be parent involvement, which was considered a huge weakness at Riverview Middle School. Research specific to determining what the characteristics are of teams that lead to improved outcomes for immigrant and refugee young adolescents also has the potential to alter subtractive schooling practices. As the

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students in my study provide anecdotal evidence that multiage teaming lead to improved academic achievement over time, further quantitative research should explore the validity of this claim with a broader group of participants. Finally, as my 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. It will be important that research around teacher dispositions and young adolescent immigrants be carried out. Asking what dispositions are needed to support the development of immigrant young adolescent learners could help to guide such research.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Summary and Implications

The discussion of findings and implications in chapter four, centered on student and teacher perceptions of a multiage/multiyear teaming structure, painted an important, but incomplete picture of the school life of the immigrant and refugee students at Riverview Middle School. While I do not propose to have uncovered everything there is to know about the schooling experiences of my fourteen participants, this chapter provides a brief summary of the findings that did not correspond with the topic of the article presented in chapter four. Two categories of findings will be presented here, student learning and social interaction, followed by a discussion of the broader implications of this research.

Student Learning

Schools are places of learning and as such I begin my continued discussion of the schooling experiences of Riverview's immigrant and refugee students by describing three aspects of student learning as framed by Green et al. (1986): the academic, instructional, and material. Individually each of these frames tells a significant story about what school was like for the students presented in this study. The first story, or academic story, described the academic expectations and accountability surrounding the students and what academic information they constructed through participation in their coursework. The instructional story looked specifically at the methods used to educate my immigrant and refugee participants. Here I share student suggestions for how to best help them learn. The final academic story that unfolded depicted the type and scope of materials used to educate the students, and how students saw these materials as influencing their

learning. Each of these individual stories offers significant insights into the schooling

lives of my participants and together they form a rather comprehensive picture of what it

meant for these students to be immigrant learners in their predominantly White setting.

The Academic Story: The Construction of Knowledge

What should my students know, do, and understand as a result of my teaching?

How do I know what my students are learning? These are the two fundamental questions

inherent in the development of academic coursework at any level and have become

increasingly significant in today's climate of educational accountability (Wiggins &

McTighe, 2005). For without answers to these questions, there is no way to measure the

learning that takes place in any given classroom with any group of students. Research

shows that these questions are particularly important to answer for young adolescents as

they are increasingly beginning to question the world around them, including the purpose

of school and they have a need to see positive results for their efforts (Brighton, 2007;

Stevenson, 2002). These questions are also imperative to answer for every student. By

this I mean that the knowing, doing, and understanding for one student may not be the

same for another just as one student may progress at a different rate than others. These

points emerged and were reinforced through the following stories and anecdotes shared

by the students and observed by myself during my three years in the field.

Academic Expectations

Framing this portion of the students' academic story were the following

questions: what are the academic expectations for immigrant students in their classes and

how are these expectations communicated with the students themselves? These questions

were ones that I found myself asking repeatedly as I observed students in both their ELL

and regular education classes. I consistently had a hard time trying to record what the purpose of the lessons were for the students I was observing and what they were supposed to be able to know, understand, and do upon a lesson's conclusion. The often confused look on the immigrant students' faces, their lack of picking up a pencil, book, or whatever the rest of the class did once the directions were given, and their constant turning to others for help, were just some of the signs that led me to believe that they, too, were unsure what the objectives of their lessons were.

The lack of clear expectations caused a significant self-identified problem for the students. They regularly described how they were given tasks to accomplish that they did not have the prerequisite skills to complete. Students cited things such as vocabulary as getting in the way of their learning. As one student said,

> I need more practice in math. I need [teachers] to help me understand better. It's difficult to understand things that other kids can know. My parents didn't have those examples in school. In math there are special words that [my parents] can't help me with. It would be helpful for teachers to know that.

Students wondered whether they should have different expectations than their native peers based on their mastery of the English language, basic skill set, and background knowledge of the subjects being taught. They often did not feel like the work they were given was fair and they distinguished between it being too hard and just not understanding the directions or purpose. This distinction was critical for students, as I will discuss in a later section of this chapter. As a result of students' confusion and lack of prerequisite knowledge, they often copied other students' work or classroom aides would just complete it for them. While this is generally seen as inappropriate behavior in

academic settings, for the immigrant students here it demonstrated their desire to do whatever they could to maintain good grades. As such, the expectations for what the students should be able to know, understand, and do independently were unclear and more importantly there was little accurate assessment of what students were able to do on their own.

Academic Meaning-Making and Level of Difficulty

The question becomes, how do you, as a teacher, know first what your students are capable of and second, what they are actually learning through your teaching? The following is a scenario that describes this situation. A group of more advanced ELL students gathers for 45 minutes every Tuesday and Thursday for a reading group. For the past couple of months or so they have been reading "The Beast," a young adult novel by Walter Dean Meyers. Each day the students come into the room; they complain, open their novels, and pretend to listen to each other read round robin style, each one taking a turn reading a paragraph or two. A student stumbles upon the word "segregation," a word critical to the theme of the book, but there is no pause in the round robin reading to stop and explain the term or its connection to the events being read. The same is true as the next student stumbles over the words "saturation" and "frivolous." This continues until the class is almost over, at which time students are asked to respond to a prompt in their journals. One or two sentences are recorded as students gather their materials to leave.

This scene was common throughout my years in the field, both in mainstream and ELL classes. Immigrant students were given tasks to do, but had little context for them. Due to this my participants often went through the motions of completing assignments without learning anything. This became clear as students consistently answered my

question of "What did you learn by doing that?" with "I don't know." However, when asked about the difficulty of the work given, students felt that they were not challenged. As one student said, "Give me a little harder work and help me to understand." While teachers described wanting to focus on making students feel comfortable and safe, students tended to share a desire for more of a balance between the social and the academic.

The Content Itself

The content, or subject matter, presented in any class is the means through which students learn the skills and thinking processes necessary to be successful throughout life. It is the part of the curriculum that should pull students in, engage them, and encourage them to want to learn more. However, often times the content presented to immigrant young adolescents in their core academic courses of mathematics, social studies, science, and language arts did not actually accomplish what it was meant to do. As one student stated, "I don't like school…It's annoying. They always teach the same things over and over. Teach something different, man…teach something different for once in your life…something out of Vermont or the United States." For this immigrant student, the content of his academic classes was a turn off and did little to peak his interest or to motivate his learning. Instead, he felt that his courses touched upon the same local and national topics over and over without broadening the focus to address things that interested him or related to the larger world. When I read this statement to a group of this students' immigrant peers, most students who had been in the United States for a number of years nodded their heads in agreement, adding that their backgrounds and stories were often missing from the curriculum. Chamberlain (2003) stated, "…from the beginning

students learn whether their background is 'good enough' and if their culture's contribution is not valued, they connect this to their personal identities" (p. 48).

This point is one that did not go unnoticed during my period of observation in the school. One social studies project in particular stood out for me. In an attempt to study local history, students were placed in small groups and each group was given the task of creating a different timeline of the town's history. While the timelines covered many significant local events, not one group thought of or was asked to present either a separate timeline for or integrate immigration into the existing timelines. In a class filled with students from places such as Vietnam, Bosnia, and Somalia there was no acknowledgement of how the coming of such groups had influenced the town over time. I was even less shocked when I informally asked the immigrant students what they thought of this project and they all responded by saying it was boring. Chamberlain (2003) went on to say, "In a period when young adolescent students are eager to explore, their opportunities to explore are limited. At a time when students are anxious to address social issues and be involved in community action, their ability to develop pride in their culture thwarted by curricula designed to support the dominant culture" (p. 48). This example represents one in which students could have had the opportunity to explore their cultures' economic, cultural, and intellectual contributions to local society, but that opportunity was not provided given the limitations of the assignment's content.

However, it is interesting to note that many of the newcomers responded differently to the students' statement. They did not feel that it was a problem that the curriculum tended to have a more local and national focus. Although I was initially surprised to hear this, the more I thought about it, the more it made sense for a couple of

different reasons. While I am simply speculating here, I realized that for one thing, the newcomers had not been exposed to years of learning the same things "over and over" as less recent immigrants were. In addition, it makes sense that newcomers would want to learn, or at least feel it necessary, to focus on learning about the United States and the local community. Knowledge of such topics would serve to increase their cultural capital and ability to be accepted and considered a part of the local culture.

My student participants also felt that the curriculum should be broadened in a different way. They expressed that their content area teachers did not always support their written and verbal language acquisition as well as they should have. As one student stated, "They [all teachers] should help us with our English and stuff and not just their classes." While newcomers often spent a significant amount of their day working on English, the immigrant students who had been in the country for a number of years only had specific reading and writing help for forty minutes three or four days a week. Yet many of those students still spoke at length about how they continued to struggle with the reading and writing necessary to succeed in their regular education courses. Students' scores on the national TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of other Languages) test, even after ten years in the country, were still not on a passing level. All of the students I interviewed recognized that they needed extra help and support from all of their teachers in order for this to improve.

Instructional Story: What Immigrant Students Want

The findings related to instructional methods are more general than those above. While I had hoped that my participants would divulge a list of dos and do nots for teachers, I found that students really struggled to articulate the successful strategies that

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teachers used. I saw two potential reasons for this. The first was that students were always surprised that I wanted their opinions on what worked and what did not in the classroom. Many expressed that they had never thought about these topics before. The second was that because of the first students may not have had the language to describe instruction. However, the findings do shed light on some important ideas for teachers to consider.

Knowing How Much to Support Student Learning

The bottom line for students in terms of instruction was that teachers pay attention to their individual needs. Many were very self-aware about what needed to change in their classrooms for their learning to improve. Some very clearly wanted more support. As one student articulated, "Only help me. If [teachers] talk out loud to the whole class I get confused and I get embarrassed asking questions. I need one on one help." While this student wanted her teachers to check in with her regularly to make sure she was understanding the material being presented, another student felt the exact opposite, "Let me do my work without always asking, 'Are you done?' If alone or in a quiet space I will get my work done better without all of the nagging." This student did not want his teachers to ask him if he needed help. He just wanted to be left alone to figure things out independently. What is particularly interesting about these comments, is that while both advocated for a completely different level of teacher support, they both painted a picture of their learning as happening in a separate time or space from their peers.

Instructional Strategies Recommended by Students

While I did not get my long list of strategies that work for immigrant and refugee learners, students were clear that they needed visual representations of their learnings. For example, one student shared, "Teachers should use pictures so that [immigrant] kids will understand." Another described the need to write things down so he could refer to class materials later, "I like to write notes because it helps me remember what I learned in class…When I have worksheets to do, I use them to help me find answers."

The Material Story: Text and Language

The final frame that helped describe the academic side of my participants' schooling experiences was the material frame, which encompassed the scope and types of materials used to help students access academic content. I have separated my discussion of materials into the two types that were discussed by the students: text and interpreters.

Text Materials

In term of text materials, it was clear that the teachers often tried to select text materials, particularly novels in language arts and social studies classes, that would stimulate the interest of and/or connect to the experiences of their immigrant and refugee students. I described above how a group of students read the Walter Dean Meyers novel, "The Beast" in their ELL class. When asked why this novel was chosen, the ELL teacher responded by describing that it was about two people, from different worlds, trying to relate to one another. Considering the students sitting around that table reading, including: a small, shy, obedient Vietnamese boy; a large, sixteen year old self-proclaimed former Miami gang member; and a boisterous, girl-crazy twelve year old from Somalia, it seemed like the perfect choice of a book. However, if you take away the

diversity of student disposition and experience and instead look at their reading skills: low fluency, high comprehension; extremely low decoding and comprehension; and high fluency, low comprehension, it is no wonder that students in the class did not see how it was relevant to them. Their reading skill level was either too low or the tasks involved in reading the book were too menial for any real learning to happen. This is one of many examples involving potentially high interest materials for students that were either too challenging for students to make thematic connections to their own lives or where students with the prerequisite skills read the book so slowly that they tuned it all out.

Interpreters/Translators

I placed these human resources under the theme of materials because they have the potential of helping students access the content they need to participate in the learning process. However, both students and teachers shared their concern regarding the lack of available human resources in the school. In the three years I was there I met two Bosnian interpreters, one Somali interpreter and one Vietnamese interpreter. These four individuals were responsible for supporting students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. When available, these interpreters largely supported students in after-school homework clubs. Although students appreciated the help of these individuals, they also noted that there were problems inherent in relying on someone else. As one student said, "It's easy to take things the wrong way with a translator." This was evident in situations where messages that teachers relayed to students and their parents through translators were misinterpreted.

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Social Interactions

A large part of the learning that happens in schools involves students socially interacting with their peers. The story of the immigrant and refugee students at Riverview Middle School told here concludes with a brief picture of their social life. Two themes emerged from my data related to student social interactions: how immigrant and refugee students want to be treated by their peers and the social pressures they felt not being from the dominant culture. A description of each follows.

Interactions with Peers

Lend a Helping Hand

Without a doubt, immigrant students want the support and help of their fellow classmates, and in fact, they rely on it. As one student said, "You can help [immigrants] out. Students helped me out when I was lost." Another described how students should continue to reach out to immigrants even when they do not appear to want help at first, "If [immigrants] just came, help them out, don't pick on them. Kids want to help and they feel bad for us, but sometimes [immigrants] are nervous and don't respond." What both of these statements stressed was not only the need for students to support their immigrant peers, but the need for native students to take the first step in offering help, as opposed to waiting for immigrants to ask.

We're Just Like Everyone Else

When asked directly what they wanted their peers to know and understand about them, my participants overwhelmingly responded with some variation of "we're like everyone else." However, there was a continuum of responses related to just how much like everyone else immigrant students saw themselves. One student responded,

"Everyone's the same. They may speak differently, but we're the same." For this student it was important to point out that language was the one thing that distinguished immigrant students from their peers. Another student acknowledged greater differences, without citing exactly what they were, "So people understand that [immigrants] are different in a good way. Be respectful. Treat them the same." Yet another student wanted to expel the myth that immigrant students were "goody-goodies." She said, "That there is a different side to [immigrants]. I want [other students] to know that I am just like them, not just a goody-goody." This desire to be seen and treated like one's peers relates to my next theme, social pressures.

Social Pressures

Although my participants did not specifically speak about the social pressure they felt to fit in, their actions and words showed how important this was to them. Beyond wanting to be treated like everyone else, the immigrant students were generally uncomfortable sharing anything about their cultures with their classmates. For example, I was observing a literature circle where a small group of students was reading and discussing a novel about the Vietnam War. The teacher circulated to this group and asked a Vietnamese student to share something about Vietnam with the group, so that they could better visualize the story. The Vietnamese student rolled her eyes and responded by saying that she didn't know anything about Vietnam. However, when I spoke to this student one on one during an interview she told me she wished her peers knew "That Vietnam was a cool country." Discrepancies such as this permeated my data, but made sense when examined with comments like this one shared during an ELL class, "My cousins are moving up here, but I don't want them to because they are embarrassing." At

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an age when students rely on peers to help them develop a sense of self-worth,

negotiating who they were at home and who they were at school, proved challenging for

many students.

<p style="text-align:center;">*Implications*</p>

Although this study presented a small sampling of student perspectives on the

immigrant experience in middle schools, and cannot be generalized to other settings,

there is much to be learned from it. I close this chapter with a description of implications

related to educators and policy makers, teacher educators, and researchers, beyond those

presented in the article in chapter four.

For Educators and Policy Makers

More attention needs to be placed on individual students' experiences as opposed

to group or organizational factors. Although my data demonstrated that there were

commonalities in the immigrant experience at Riverview Middle School, it also showed

that when it came to academics in particular, students had very unique needs. Lumping

students into a class labeled ELL without taking into consideration student strengths and

areas for growth did not enhance the learning of my participants. Instead it made many

bitter and further reject their immigrant status. Along these lines, all teachers need to

have clear expectations for their immigrant students, which will often differ from those of

their regular education students and from immigrant student to student. Without requiring

such expectations teachers often assumed that immigrant students could do less than they

could, so students often sat in the back of classes with nothing to do. Developing an

assessment plan, which collected baseline data on new immigrant students, and sharing

these data with all teachers, would help in the development of a differentiated academic program for every immigrant student.

Curricula in multilingual/multicultural settings needs to reflect the diversity of the population and have a strong focus on reading and writing across all content areas. The students in my study recognized that they were missing from the school's curricula and cited this as a reason for their lack of engagement in their classes. The need for students to see themselves in the content of their learning is supported by the research (Chamberlain, 2003). Students also noted the need to work on their reading and writing skills within their content classes as opposed to working on these skills in isolation during ELL class. This need is also reflected in recent literature (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2005) as there is a strong national focus on adolescent literacy across the curriculum.

Schools need to find a balance between meeting immigrant and refugee students' emotional and social as well as academic needs. The data in chapter four demonstrated that Riverview Middle School has done much to support the emotional and in many ways social development of its students. However, teacher and student comments reflect that a focus on their academic needs has been secondary to this. The students at Riverview found this problematic.

Finally, general education teachers need professional development geared specifically toward working with immigrant learners. There is a plethora of recent information for teachers regarding instructional strategies for English Language Learners. Schools need to provide opportunities for teachers to be exposed to this literature and hold teachers accountable for implementing it in their classrooms. However, beyond

instructional strategies, teachers also need the time and the resources to learn more about the immigrant experience.

For Teacher Education

The teachers that I interviewed at Riverview Middle School all shared their concern around the little preparation they had received in educating diverse populations. This included both veteran teachers and recent graduates of teacher education programs. I suggest the following to help teacher education programs fill this gap in preparing educators to work in diverse settings. First, I recommend early exposure to literature related to teacher assumptions, which should involve an ongoing reflective journal of personal assumptions as well observations of the assumptions of others in the classroom. Pre-service teachers also need to have at least one placement in a diverse site. In addition, as part of curriculum and assessment courses students should be asked to examine local curricula and critique it based on its inclusion of all local perspectives as well as identify and create lessons specifically tailored to immigrant students. Finally, I suggest the development of a tool for pre-service teachers to observe and evaluate middle grades students as their peers teach. This would provide pre-service teachers with a way of understanding various' students' experiences with a lesson. While this is by no means an exhaustive list of the possibilities for teacher education, it presents options based on the spectrum of topics that should be covered.

For Research

The data I presented and the relative lack of literature on the schooling of immigrant and refugee students, suggests the need for much continued research on this subject. One topic for further research should focus on a successful professional

development model for teachers around immigrant and refugee learners. What topics/information should be included in such a program? How is the information best disseminated to school faculties? What methods have the strongest impact on teacher practice? These are some of the questions that should frame such research.

Another topic that should be explored is the gathering of baseline data on immigrant and refugee students. Determining what data would be most helpful to teachers would be an important first step. It will also be important to determine what tools, if any, are currently available, and how they are currently used. My research also suggests that school mentoring programs may have potential in providing the type of academic and social support that my immigrant and refugee students felt they were lacking. Exploring the literature related to this, as well as experimenting with programs in diverse settings will further test this as a possibility.

In conducting my literature review, I found that current theories on identity formation did not fit the context of the students in this study who were part of such a small minority, and sometimes even a sole representative, of a particular culture. Asking how students successful negotiate identify formation in such a context and how schools support this would provide a framework for such research. Finally, two perspectives were missing from my research that need to be included in the dialogue, those of families of young adolescent immigrant and refugee students as well as those of their non-immigrant peers. Including these two perspectives would help provide a more complete picture of the schooling experiences of immigrant and refugee students in middle schools.

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APPENDIX A: Parent and Student Letters and Consent Form

Dear Winooski Parents/Guardians:

As you know, Winooski has a diverse population of students from different international countries. As former classroom teachers of students in grades five through eight, as well as of refugee and immigrant students, we understand the importance of addressing the needs of all students. We also hope to help teachers to adapt their teaching and to gain a better understanding about the schooling experiences of middle level grade students who come from different linguistic and cultural communities. Grades five through eight is a critical period as students seek to become more independent and question who they are as they simultaneously face more challenging academic experiences. Your child was identified by the school as a thoughtful student who is also an English Language Learner (ELL) who might be interested in helping us with our study. Therefore, we are inviting your child, and others in the ELL program at Winooski Middle School, to be observed and interviewed about their school experiences for our study, "Understanding the Learning Experiences of the Middle Grades English Language Learner."

The students who will contribute to this yearlong study attend the ELL program at Winooski Middle School. We will conduct 2 interviews with the students at a mutually convenient site, and they typically last between 30 and 90 minutes, not to interrupt with the regular school schedule. The interviews will be tape-recorded and transcribed and the audiotapes will remain in our home offices. A part of the research focus will be on the development of their English literacy, specifically writing, so we will collect student work samples, such as writings and drawings. In order to maintain privacy, nothing your child says will be personally identifiable; all names of children, teachers, school and town will be replaced with pseudonyms. Students have the option to end their participation in the study at any time, without question. After the completion of our research, the findings potentially may be published in article or book format. If you wish, you and your child will be given a final copy of the findings and of any possible publications.

If you and your child agree for him or her to participate, and we hope you will, please sign the attached form and return it in the envelope provided. It you have questions or comments about this inquiry, please do not hesitate to contact one of us to talk more about this process. We would also be available to meet with you personally to answer questions. Thank you for the time you have already contributed by reading this letter.

Sincerely,

Dr. Cynthia Reyes   Kathleen Brinegar, Doctoral Student
(802) 656-9642   (802) 656-1431
creyes@uvm.edu   kathleen.brinegar@uvm.edu

Dear Winooski Middle Grade Student:

We used to be teachers in grades five through eight, and now we teach people who want to be teachers. We are interested in how students your age and who come from different countries and speak different languages other than English learn. Because of this, we will be observing in your different classrooms twice a week during the school year. We will also interview a group of English language learners (ELL) about their experiences in the classrooms, for our study, "Understanding the Learning Experiences of the Middle Grades English Language Learner." Your school teachers suggested your name as someone who might be interested in talking with us. The interviews don't take very long, and they will take place somewhere that is convenient for everyone – maybe at your school, maybe at your house, or possibly somewhere else! In order to protect your privacy, when we write about our research, we will change all names of students, teachers, school, and town, so no one reading the report can tell who has participated. Most students find it kind of fun to talk about themselves and their lives as students. We will also ask you to draw a picture of your learning, as well as collect some of your work samples. However, if you decide during the interview that you don't want to answer a question or that you don't want to talk anymore, we can end the interview right away. A few months after this interview, we will come back to talk with you again for a shorter period of time.

Along with this letter to you, we are sending home a letter to your parents to ask for their permission as well. If you are interested in being interviewed for our study, and we hope you are, please talk it over with your parents. If you all agree, please sign the attached permission slip and send it back to us in the envelope provided.

Sincerely,

Dr. Cynthia Reyes   Kathleen Brinegar, Doctoral Student
(802) 656-9642   (802) 656-1431
creyes@uvm.edu   kathleen.brinegar@uvm.edu

<center>**Statement of Consent**</center>
<center>Research Study: Understanding the Learning Experiences of the Middle Grades English
Language Learner</center>

I have read the attached letter describing the research study. It has been explained to my full satisfaction. Should I have further questions about the research, I realize I am free to contact the people conducting the study at the telephone numbers provided. If I have any questions about my rights as a participant in a research project I can contact Nancy Stalnaker, the Director of the Research Protections Office at the University of Vermont at (802) 656-5040.

I understand that my/my child's participation is voluntary and that I/he/she may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time.

I realize that the results of this study may eventually be published, but that all names of children, teachers, school and town will be replaced with pseudonyms.

I agree to participate in this study, to the two interviews, and I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this form.

Check here if you would like us to contact you for a personal meeting. _____

_____
Name of Child (please print)

_____
Signature of Child   Date

_____
Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian   Date

Name of Principal Investigator: Cynthia Reyes, Ph.D.
Address: 409B Waterman Bldg., 85 S. Prospect St., Burlington, VT 05405
Telephone Number: (802) 656-9642
Email address: creyes@uvm.edu

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APPENDIX B: Teacher Letter and Consent Form

Dear Winooski Teacher:

As you know, Winooski has a richly diverse population of students from different international countries. As former classroom teachers of students in grades five through eight, as well as of refugee and immigrant students, we understand the importance of addressing the needs of all students; in addition, we aim to help other teachers to adapt their teaching and to gain a better understanding about the schooling experiences of middle level grade students who come from different linguistic and cultural communities. Grades five through eight is a critical period as students seek to become more independent and question who they are as they simultaneously face more challenging academic experiences. These children were identified by the school as thoughtful students who also attend the English Language Learner (ELL) program at Winooski who might be interested in helping us with our study. We are also inviting you, their teacher, and others who have ELL students in their classrooms at Winooski Middle School, to be interviewed about your own experiences teaching these students and to allow us to observe in your classroom for our study, "Understanding the Learning Experiences of the Middle Grades English Language Learner."

During the yearlong study, we will conduct interviews with the teachers at a mutually convenient site, and they typically last between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviews will be tape-recorded and transcribed and the audiotapes will remain in our home offices. A part of the research focus will be on the development of the ELL student's English literacy, specifically writing, so we will collect student work samples, such as writings and drawings. In order to maintain privacy, nothing you say will be personally identifiable; all names of children, teachers, school and town will be replaced with pseudonyms. You have the option to end your participation in the study at any time, without question. After the completion of our research, the findings potentially may be published in article or book format. If you wish, you will be given a final copy of the findings and of any possible publications.

If you agree to participate, and we hope you will, please sign the attached form and return it in the envelope provided. It you have questions or comments about this inquiry, please do not hesitate to contact one of us to talk more about this process. Thank you for the time you have already contributed by reading this letter.

Sincerely,

Dr. Cynthia Reyes   Kathleen Brinegar, Doctoral Student
(802) 656-9642   (802) 656-1431
creyes@uvm.edu   kathleen.brinegar@uvm.edu

Teacher Statement of Consent

Research Study: Understanding the Learning Experiences of the Middle Grades English Language Learner

I have read the attached letter describing the research study. It has been explained to my full satisfaction. Should I have further questions about the research, I realize I am free to contact the people conducting the study at the telephone numbers provided. If I have any questions about my rights as a participant in a research project I can contact Nancy Stalnaker, the Institutional Review Board Administrator at the University of Vermont at (802) 656-5040.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time.

I realize that the results of this study may eventually be published, but that all names of children, teachers, school and town will be replaced with pseudonyms.

I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this form.

_____

Name of Teacher (please print)

_____

Signature of Teacher   Date

Name of Principal Investigator: Cynthia Reyes, Ph.D.
Address: 409B Waterman Bldg., 85 S. Prospect St., Burlington, VT 05405
Telephone Number: (802) 656-9642
Email address: creyes@uvm.edu

General Information
Tell me about yourself.
Probes:
Age? Grade? Amount of time lived in Riverview? Where else have you lived? Family?
What do you like to do for fun? What do you want to do when you are older?

School
Tell me about your schooling experiences before coming to Riverview.
Probes:
What did you like about it? What did you dislike about it? Favorite teacher, Favorite
class, Worst teacher, Worst class

Describe your schooling experience in Riverview.
Probes:
Same as above, How does it compare with your other experiences? Which do you prefer?
Why?

What do you think about being on a "team" here at Riverview?
Probes:
Does it help you academically, socially? Does it hinder you academically, socially?

How important is it to you to get a good education?
Probes:
Why? Does that come from your family?

**If you had the opportunity to tell your teachers anything about you- what would you
want them to know?**
Probes:
About your background, about school, what you like to do, anything

**If you could give teachers any advice on how they can best help you to be successful,
what would you say to them?**
Probes:
In school, at home, later in life

Peer Relationships
Tell me about your friends.
Probes:
Have you made a lot in Riverview? What are their ethnic backgrounds? What do you like
to do for fun with them? Do you get together outside of school? How are your friends in
Riverview different from friends you've had in the past? How are they the same?

How do you go about making friends in a new school?
Are you involved in any extracurricular activities?

Probes:

Such as band? Sports? Art, etc. If no, why? If yes, have you made friends through these activities?

How have the other students treated you since you have come to Riverview?
Probes:

Have they been accepting? Have you felt discriminated against in any way?

What would you want your classmates to know about you?
Probes:

…to help them accept you more, to help them to understand where you're coming from, etc.

APPENDIX D: Teacher Interview Protocol

General questions about the immigrant/refugee population
1. *In what capacity do you/have you worked with immigrant/refugee students?*

2. *How would you describe the immigrant/refugee population at RMS?*

3. *What nationalities have you worked with?*

4. *Would you say these students help to enhance a school community and if so, how?*

Needs
5. *In what ways do the needs of this population differ from the rest of a school's population?*

6. *What are some of the greatest challenges for these students?*

Peer Relationships
7. *How do other students respond to/relate to/interact with immigrant/refugee students?*

8. *How do immigrant/refugee students respond to/relate to/interact with their peers?*

Teaching
9. *What type of training (professional development or other) have you had in working with immigrant/refugee students?*

10. *How effective was/is that training?*

11. *What challenges due faculty members face in schooling immigrant/refugee students?*

12. *What characteristics does a teacher need to possess in order to successfully school immigrant and/or refugee students?*

13. *What instructional methods have you found particularly helpful in the schooling of immigrant/refugee students?*

School structure
14. *How are the developmental structures you discussed above effective in meeting the needs of immigrant/refugee students?*

15. *How would you change the structure of the school to better meet the needs of immigrant/refugee students?*

Parent Involvement

16. How important have you observed parent involvement is in the schooling of immigrant/refugee students?

Overall Assessment

17. What are your recommendations for how RMS can better meet the needs of immigrant/refugee students?

18. What advice would you give to a classroom teacher who has a refugee students placed in his/her classroom for the first time?

19. Is there anything else you would like to share?