

Student Name

Date

Somali Charter Schools: An Alternative pathway to immigrant and refugee incorporation?

Statement of the Problem

Since *Brown vs. Board of Education*, policymakers have generally emphasized that American public schools should avoid segregation and that students from diverse backgrounds should learn from one another. But, in Minneapolis, MN, some Somali communities have taken an altogether different approach: they have started Somali charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately run, and follow a different curriculum than public schools based on cultural segregation. In my research, I will study the Somali charter school system in Minneapolis, focusing on the process of incorporation. Incorporation is broadly defined as the way in which migrant groups adapt to life in a receiving community—in this case, the U.S. A number of distinct pathways to incorporation have been identified by scholars, such as acculturation, assimilation, bicultural competence, among others. The questions driving my research are: how do Somali charter schools operate as a site of incorporation for refugees and immigrants? And what kind of incorporation do they facilitate?

Literature

To my knowledge, few studies exist that focus on Somali charter schools, in part because of their recent emergence. Indeed, Somalis are a fairly recent group of immigrants and refugees, and have not been studied in depth (as opposed to groups like Chinese or Hispanic immigrants

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who have been coming to the U.S. for much longer). Most scholars today agree that conventional assimilation, or the process whereby migrant groups come to completely learn the culture of the dominant group without strong affiliation with their old culture (Arthur, 2000) is not the form of incorporation that African immigrants and other groups of refugees and immigrants are or should be taking.

Some literature suggests that a focus on acculturation in schools help students become 'multicultural' navigators which can be beneficial, while other scholars note that maintaining strong cultural communities and ethnic ties help students succeed. The first body of literature concludes that bicultural competence or acculturation is the successful path to incorporation. This involves constructing a cultural identity that allows immigrants to fully function in mainstream U.S. society while simultaneously retaining a connection to their families and local community (Segal, 2002). This would involve Somali students retaining Somali cultural and religious beliefs while also learning English and American values, and navigating both cultural worlds. Research suggests the benefits of acculturation, such as global skills, multilingualism, access to resources at both home and school, and the utilization of skills brought from the home country (Zhou, 1997; Suarez-Orozco, 2001). The second body of literature proposes that successful incorporation involves the creation of ethnic communities and the reenactment of elements of the migrants' culture, with strong religious undertones. Shepard (2008), for example, argues that for non-white immigrants who face institutionalized racial and economic marginalization, assimilation and acculturation often lead them to fall into the American underclass with little socioeconomic mobility and high rates of academic failure. This would suggest that Somali students should take advantage of their community and networks, and

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maintain their culture and religion in schools, as assimilation or acculturation would lead to failure.

In my research, I will look at how charter schools are serving as mechanisms of incorporation or a reaction to non-incorporation in public schools. I will focus on what *kind* of incorporation Somali students are taking in charter schools, and consider to what extent this new type of school generates distinct pathways of incorporation. This is a timely study given that Somali charter schools are a highly relevant and contested issue not only in the Minneapolis community, but also in Somali communities and public schools throughout the country (in addition to other cultural charter schools). Understanding the pathway of incorporation of these students will add to the scarce body of literature on Somali charter schools and to the important debates about the role and impact of schools on newer, but growing groups of immigrants and refugees in this country.

Methods

To study Somali charter schools as a pathway to incorporation, I will interview teachers, students, and administrators at a co-ed charter school in Minneapolis, MN. Minneapolis is the area in which there is the largest group of Somali immigrants and refugees in the U.S. and the only city which has specific Somali charter schools.

Based on my definition of incorporation as the various pathways in which migrant groups adapt to life in the U.S., I will focus on critical variables to determine the process through which

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incorporation is happening in charter schools. Existing research has identified the following variables as shaping schools as sites of incorporation: programs in schools to help with cultural and linguistic incorporation; diverse curricula; education and income level of parents; skin color and discrimination from peers; previous education and experiences in home country; familiarity with teacher's expectations; attitudes and beliefs of parents; gender expectations; immigration status; and attitudes and abilities of teachers or counselors. My interview questions will be centered around these variables. Based on their responses—and using the framework of existing definitions of incorporation—I will determine the pathway of incorporation occurring in Somali charter schools.

More specifically, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with teachers, students, and administrators of one co-ed Somali charter school, in order determine the pathway of incorporation that Somali students are taking in charter schools. I will use a non-probability method of sampling, which relies on available subjects—those close at hand or accessible, which is good for harder to reach populations, such as Somali immigrants. Specifically, I will use snowball sampling, through which I will contact school officials both to interview them and to help me identify other administrators, teachers and students/past students aged 18 and over to interview. In addition to interviews, I will collect data on the school's curriculum, as well as other secondary documents like census data, school policy documents, and standardized test scores.

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Works Cited

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