
"THEY LOOK LIKE PAPER": REFUGEE STUDENTS EXPERIENCING AND CONSTRUCTING 'THE SOCIAL' AT A QUEENSLAND HIGH SCHOOL

Casey Smith
James Cook University, Townsville
Kelsey Halbert
James Cook University, Townsville

Abstract

Educational institutions in Australia face complex challenges in providing inclusive learning experiences for a growing number of North African refugee students. This paper explores the school experiences of five North African refugee students who volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews in 2012. A qualitative intrinsic case study approach was employed to investigate participant experiences with their Australian peers. This included peer influence on defining social norms and the articulation of race, religion and social differences. Foucault's theories of discourse, the subject, disciplinary practices and normalisation, have been utilised as tools to drive the exploration of students' experiences.

Participants encountered 'difference' in the Australian schooling context that affected their ability to connect to the social discourse and the disciplinary systems of school. Participants indicated that their knowledge of themselves, and others, had developed from a point of 'difference' and isolation, to ways of 'seeing' the characteristics of the 'Australian' student and the diversity within their 'white' peers and teachers. Exploring this discursive negotiation illuminates the taken-for-granted ways these students come to know the role of student, friend and school in facilitating membership and belonging.

Introduction

Refugees arriving in a new country face a number of confronting challenges. Pre-migration experiences include conflict, persecution, hostility, political and religious upheaval (Gray and Elliot 2001, Taylor 2008). As settled refugees, research indicates that post migration experiences can include the mental anguish of loneliness, financial issues, health matters, and other concerns pertaining to the transition and adaptation of a new cultural and educational context (Boman and Edwards 1984, Clinton-Davis and Fassil 1992, Kopinak 1998, Pittaway et al. 2009, Wilkinson 2002). There are strong indications that "...refugee children's well-being depends to a major degree on their school experiences" (Richman 1998a cited Hek 2005, p. 29, Cassity and Gow 2006a).

Emerging Australian studies exploring refugee experiences have emphasised student engagement, aspirations, challenges, teacher and student identity, resources, (Brown et al. 2006, Cassidy and Gow 2006a, Dooley 2009, Olliff and Couch 2005) refugee performance (Balfour 2009), and transition experiences within education, society and employment (Brown et al. 2006, Cassity and Gow 2006a, Olliff and Couch, 2005). Cassity and Gow (2006b) suggest that newly arrived refugee youth mainly experience Australian society through their participation in school. Matthews (2007) notes that "eighty nine percent of refugee background students are enrolled in government schools...", highlighting the schooling division that requires further investigation (p.2). The schooling system provides a platform for refugee youth to improve their language acquisition and social skills, in addition to encountering society's norms, cultural customs and values. This facilitates their participation in their new community and country (Cassity and Gow 2006b, McBrien 2005, Wilkinson 2002).

It is through participation in school, and particularly the interaction with peers that normative values, behaviours and 'ways of being' can be observed, discerned and disclosed (Cassity and Gow 2006b, McBrien 2005, Richman 1998a cited Hek 2005, Wilkinson 2002). Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier and Ryan (1991) propose that "...schools represent a primary socializing influence that has enormous impact on the course of people lives and, in turn, on society" (p.325). As schooling has a significant effect on subjectivity, it is an investigation of the layered social discourses, which can illuminate the voices of refugee students.

Method

This project adopts a Foucauldian lens in the discursive analysis of focus group data with North African¹ refugee students. These students' understandings of self have been shaped by interactions with Australian peers and perceptions of 'difference' within the Australian schooling context. The term 'difference' refers to how individuals perceived themselves to differ from the 'norm'. A 'norm', "establishes categories of people, the boundaries between these categories and clearly defines the people who do 'not fit' within the boundaries" (Krieg 2010, p.57).

Our discussions sit within a post-structuralist paradigm. Using this conceptual framework, promotes "...the possibility of agency to the subjects through the very act of making visible the discursive threads through which their experience of themselves as specific beings is woven" (Davies 1994, p.12). This paradigm is entrenched in a qualitative research approach and in this case, an intrinsic case study design was utilised to facilitate an in-depth single investigation into the unique (case) set of experiences. This is not case study as narrative but as recognition of the discourses mobilised by these particular students. This aligns with our theoretical lens by rejecting notions of generalizability or the tendency to construct a dominant or representative narrative. The case study approach provided the opportunity to create a flexible free space for interviewing; a technique that stimulates the collection of a rich data set and the prospect of attaining additional emergent data (Cassell and Symon 2004, Ramirez and Matthews 2008). The data collection was comprised of a 20 minute group interview focusing on participant experiences with their peers and perceptions of Australian norms. Individual semi-structured interviews took place on a different day for 15 minutes and explored these experiences further. Interviews allowed for student discourse to be observed enabling the lead researcher to define the differences between students, and identify if their conceptualisations of 'self' are "unchangeable, regardless of changes in cultural contexts" (Danaher et al. 2000), p.117).

This study gives voice to North African refugee youth rather than promoting the institutional hierarchies of the school that attribute to the authoritative voice of teachers or policy makers. Here 'giving voice' seeks to disrupt the dominant discourses which designate certain characteristics of need and risk to refugee students. Giving voice is not about representing students' voices verbatim but about pulling apart taken for granted experiences of schooling through the perspective of this 'othered' group. The research facilitates a dialogue about the practices by which these students are free to constitute themselves, develop knowledge of themselves (and also care of self) amidst the social discourses of the school. Foucault positions freedom as the ontological condition for ethics especially when freedom takes the form of a kind of informed reflection. Unavoidably, researcher voice and representations of student experience can not be seen as 'truth' but as interactions between researcher and student that in themselves, constitute knowledge of self and other.

Participants

The study included the participation of five North African refugee students currently in regular attendance at a regional state high school in Queensland. These students were enrolled in mainstream classes. The pseudonym North Shore State High School (NSSHS) was utilised. NSSHS is a co-

¹ 'North African' refers to students who identified as being from Somalia (n=4) and Kenya (n=1).

educational institution with approximately 700 students and teachers, who represent a range of social backgrounds in the community. The school has a significant population of refugee students. The students were selected based on considerations of time since arrival, language proficiency and socio-emotional wellbeing. Within this study, the five refugee students were the 'subjects' who are "produced by discourses, institutions and relations of power" (Danaher et al. 2000, p.116). The participants do have a sense of 'freedom' in Australia, however their agency is still restricted by the discursive formations within society and as such, refugee students are frequently deprived of agency. The subjects have been shaped by the schooling context and developed their sense of belonging by ensuring what they say and do reflects the values, beliefs and discourse that the society and its disciplinary institutions convey.

Data analysis

The data was analysed using Michel Foucault's theories of discourse, power, knowledge and the subject as a theoretical lens. Discourse is used in the current study to describe "language in action- the ideas and statements that allow [the refugee participants] to make sense of and 'see' things" (Danaher et al. 2000, p. 10). The verbal interview data was transcribed into a written format and coded manually (Davies 1994, Creswell 2007). Design limitations included time constraints, participant recruitment, sample size, ethical considerations and the limitations pertaining to a case study design (Brown 2008; Kervin et al. 2006).

Results and discussion

"...we are not aware of the distinctiveness and the circumscription of our own behaviour until we meet its normative boundaries in the shape of alternative forms" (Cohen 1982, p.4).

The study examined the influence of 'peers' on the study participants. The subjects also discussed a number of associated sub-themes including belonging, Australian norms and perceptions of the 'other' (peers), and discriminating the 'other'.

Belonging and outsider identity

At the group interview all students expressed an eagerness to 'get in' with Australian students:

It looked very scary and very something new to you. 'Cause it was my first time to go to school in Australia, and it was first time to see Australian students going to school. Australian teachers, Australia classes, how the Australians adapt to school, how they do the school. It was very exciting for me...I was trying to get in and trying to talk and communicate with them (Altair).

Getting 'in' and communicating with Australian peers was a process of observing and adopting the normative discourse of NSSHS. Students' ability to decode the 'how' is central to their ability to 'adapt' and 'belong'. Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) explain that "schools are one of the first and most influential service systems that young refugees come into contact with after resettlement" (p.30). Altair referred to his initial eagerness to 'get in' during the group interview, however at his individual interview, he spoke of a sense of isolation from his Australian peers: "The first time it looked like to me very alone. I was by myself...I was sitting by myself, doing the work by myself. No one talking to me". It is evident that Altair's difficulty in establishing peer relationships impacted his sense of belonging. Belonging is defined as the way in which the participants feel connected to the people and places around them and how they are valued and accepted as individuals. Recognition of normalising factors and "...knowing the ways in which cultural practices can be varied..." gives students the opportunity to achieve a sense of belonging without losing their individual cultural identity (Davies 1994, p.9).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) present the notion that emotional tribulation "...results from people's failure to meet their belongingness needs" (p.521). Furthermore, Osterman (2000) argues that student emotional wellbeing is considerably impacted by peer relationship status. This notion was made evident by Altair as he linked his difficulty in 'belonging' to a lack of peer relationships and the current study also revealed how participants dealt with initial inability to fit in. Aisha chose withdrawal as a strategy to deal with her lack of 'belonging':

When I come first, it was hard to me when I sit, I didn't listen to anything. I didn't see anyone, I was just sleeping...In Africa, these are all your sisters and brothers, but here, all the students, they are not kin to you.

Aisha's failure to relate to her peers was demonstrated by noting that they were not kin; a notion she directly linked to connectedness. This conceptualisation of 'belonging' was shaped by her experiences in Africa where kin support was central to her ability to interact and build social networks. When discussing refugee schooling experiences, Jones (1996) attributes emotional reactions including withdrawal, to a lack of belonging. Jones states "too many of our youth have crawled beneath the blanket of despair and are suffocating from a lack of human connection..." (1996 cited Osterman 2000, p.361). Fozdar and Torezani (2008) argue that making social connections and building social networks is significant for refugees as they found individual well-being could be established through social connection, providing support and personal interaction.

Attaining a sense of belonging was dependant on the refugee students engaging in the role of a student at NSSHS. The refugee students were isolated socially and were aware that they sat outside of the dominant discourse and were not initially in a position to 'get in'.

Discourse – language and power

North African refugee perceptions of their peers were a prominent reference for the ways in which refugee students reflected on their own identity and the identity of 'Australians'. When reflecting upon peer perceptions, participants initially discussed discursive constraints.

"Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages..." (Samovar et al. 1981, p.24).

Language differences constituted, and were a marker of boundaries between the students and their peers. The English language was positioned as the 'norm', situating the Somali language as the 'other'. Ahmed stated "...they speak English, we were speaking Somali". The idiosyncratic Australian vernacular (slang) was considered particularly 'confusing' English. In navigating the discourse, the students pursued a number of targeted strategies to develop social connections. Aisha explained how she used resilience and a staged process of increasing interaction: "...trying to talk to them first time, they are laughing to me, second time they talk to me, then they answer to me. Third time we are learning each other. Aisha's confidence was diminished when Australian peers disregarded her attempts to communicate. Over time she became more self assured, developing communication skills in a graduated process that involved interplay with her peers, where she was overlooked, rejected, tolerated, accepted and integrated into a peer group. Some of the participants acquired basic English language skills prior to settlement in Australia. Altair noted that "...in Africa there was a class about how to communicate with other people, especially the Australia[n]..." Small deviations from standard English and the use of Australian vernacular by peers caused problems: "Even the word 'Mum', I didn't really know. I knew 'Mother' and they said 'Mum', and I say what is 'Mum'? And even 'Dad', I know only 'Father' and they say 'Dad'" (Aisha). Interviews suggest a need for individuals with an ESL background to be provided with targeted instruction pertaining to the Australian vernacular. The other aspect of building communication between male study participants and their peers was the ability to establish a physical rapport. Students identified a link between

playing sport and communication by suggesting you: "...had to play with them, to communicate with them" (Altair). The Refugee Council of Australia (2010) proposed sport "...has important social impacts, as it assists in building social cohesion and in reducing isolation..." (p.10). This highlights the importance of ensuring refugee students have the opportunity to partake in sporting activities.

The male participants also privileged Facebook to build social networks with their peer groups: "Yeah I use it... I find it very helpful...to get more friends" (Altair). Participants indicated that it is a less confronting way to practice English, as it is "...easier when you type" (Ahmed). Iwasaki (2008) explains that communication methods such as email, improves ESL students' confidence and speaking skills in the language. Social media involves multi-literacies and makes networking visible. This dedicated social space is not regulated and has the potential (given equitable access) to foster students' sense of belonging and social support.

Another visible communicative tool was gesture and body language. The participants highlighted peer body language as helpful in enabling them to ascertain peer behaviour and attitudes. Svašek (2008) indicates that individuals, particularly those who are not native speakers of a language "...use learned body language to communicate..." (p.219). Participants noted that their Australian peers were 'happy' and friendly through body language (i.e. facial expressions such as smiling) and verbal cues (i.e. saying hello): "...in Australia, there's more joking...in Australia, if a person likes you, he is laughing to you, to show you he's happy ..." (Tareef). This positive behaviour extended to peers providing assistance: "...he help me, and when I need to go to Office, or when I need to go toilet, or somewhere else, he was helping me" (Tareef). Participants also perceived the majority of their Australian peers to have a respectful attitude: "...they [Australian's] say thank you, please, they will ask you the good way, and in Africa they say I need that, I need this, I need that, but in here I see them respectful..." (Amina). While Amina liked the use of words such as 'please' and 'thank you', all participants initially found them to be confusing, as they were not a part of the North African culture. Mimicry was used to appropriate Australian manners: "...I get confused, I don't know, so I watch other people say 'Please' and 'Thank you'. I learn from Australia... I follow what the other students do at school" (Amina).

While the majority of their peers were helpful and generally respectful, students also had to negotiate negative attitudes which challenged their sense of belonging. Participants noted two divergent attitudes "...some of them say to me 'Welcome to Australia', and some of them are like 'Go back to where you come from' (Ahmed). The participants could not identify 'normative' behaviour and attitudes for an 'Australian', instead, suggesting positive and negative behaviour.

Visibility of Culture: Colour, Religion and Gender

As initial verbal communication with peers was difficult, the subjects relied on their visual perceptions to navigate their place at NSSHS. Our power position affects how we *see* others, as such, it was confronting for students to *see* their Australian 'white' peers for the first time as a member of the minority group: "...When I first come to Australia...I see all the people. They are all white, and Africa, the people, they are all black and it was just a surprise for me" (Aisha). This initial culture shock was met with much astonishment and made participants feel isolated and lost among their peers: "...when they are laughing with all their friends, I am just only me, I see to my left side, I see to my right side, and they are all white, I was stuck" (Aisha). As the participants became accustomed to the Australian context, their awareness of colour differences was dulled:

They looked like paper! And when I stayed many months, a few months, and I say Miss, when I first come, you were very very white, but now you are good, I can see you. (*Aisha*)

Fozdar and Torezani (2008) highlight the difficulty refugees can encounter in negotiating their sense of self in a new context if their "...physical features...indicate their 'otherness'" (p.621). Participants were initially overwhelmed by the dominant 'white' populace and the notion of 'seeing' was used within a discourse of connectedness and a discourse of differentiation. With time, the colour

differentiation became less prominent. Aisha's knowledge, and therefore power in the discourse, developed her sense of 'self' and the 'other' to a point where she could eventually 'see' them.

Having only experienced North African discourse the participants had a narrow construct of race and religion:

When come first here from Africa, I know only all the people is Muslim, I didn't know another religion, and I know in my mind, all the people is Muslim, all the people is black (Aisha).

Aisha prioritised religion as an important facet of her identity and indicated that her Australian peers had beliefs that were quite different to her own. The fact that her religion was not the only one was significant: "...a lot of different religions...I was surprised. I was confused, but now I get it". Initial surprise, concern and confusion confronted the participants with regard to Australia's diversity and apparent 'freedom' of religious choice. Upon reflection, Aisha explained "it's good to learn about the different religions..." Exposure to peer religious beliefs and practices enabled Aisha to be more informed when faced with alternative religious practices.

Gender expectations and interactions differ dependent upon the discourse. The rules that dictate how males and females 'should' interact lead to the production of specific ways of being. All participants highlighted diverging gender practices as a challenging aspect in initial communication with peers as they were faced with two opposing sets of discursive practices; that of North Africa and Australia.

Subjects privileged clothing and gender interactions as challenging points of contention. Both the male and female participants highlighted clothing to be a surprising factor when initially attending school: "...all the boys and girls are the same, they are both wearing trousers!" (Aisha). There was a perception that male and female students were the 'same', rather than a delineation on gender roles established through clothing. Clothing held religious and cultural meaning in a North African context: "here [Australia] I see some girls, they wear jeans...in Africa they wear something to cover all the body...legs, arms...head" (Ahmed).

The participants indicated an initial fascination with boy-girl interactions. These were either rare or forbidden to them before they held residence in Australia owing to religious, cultural and societal norms. With recognition of the Australian norms, the attitudes of the participants were broadened to accept an alternative viewpoint.

[In Australia] Lady...and the boys, they can do whatever they like and I feel some freedom and its good really, it's better...It's good to get a girlfriend or boyfriend, that's a good idea, but in Africa, that absolutely doesn't happen...(Aisha)

In their study, Renzaho, Green, Mellor, and Swinburn (2011) stated that refugee participants noted "... an awareness of gender roles in broader Australian society and some departure from traditional culturally defined African gender roles" (p. 235). Aisha reiterated this as her conceptualisations of what is 'acceptable' between male and female individuals had been previously shaped by gender identities in Northern Africa. As products of (knowledge) discourse, we are always "...liable to change according to the circumstances" (Danaher et al. 2000, p.123). Settling in Australia and attending high school opened the participants up to new circumstances and, as a result, they were shaped in a manner that led them to new ways of thinking and doing. Aisha explained how her ideas regarding boy-girl relationships changed over time spent in Australia:

In Africa, boys and girls, they cannot speak each other... When I stay some months...the boys humour the girls, and the girls humour, and that's a good idea...my family, we get some people to come to us, give advice to us [about gender roles]... We get a seminar.

Participants became more comfortable with these behaviours through their exposure to the Australian culture. In particular, Aisha recalled the importance of a seminar in providing her family with knowledge of gender interactions and the 'appropriate' ways to respond to these.

Discriminating the 'other'

In Australian schools, refugee students "...face racist and attitudinal barriers which are further impediments towards their full inclusion in society" (Taylor and Sidhu 2012, p.41). Racial discrimination was a frequent theme that our participants discussed. This discrimination, was based on the visible cultural markers already discussed. Refugee students spoke of Australian peers identifying "...different language, different culture, [and] different colour" (Altair). All participants found that their 'difference' was more pronounced as they were a minority group. 'Othering' was a principle method of discrimination: "When I was first came to school... Some student ignoring me saying "you African, go back to your country" (Altair). Colour was a frequent discriminatory label:

They say to me 'Go back to your country'... 'Your skin, this skin is not good skin, it is dirty skin'...A boy came, he took my, he took his arms, and he say 'See the difference between your skin and my skin?...my skin is clean, and yours is a bit dirty...go and take shower!' (Amina).

The participants have revealed that harassment due to colour can take a variety of forms. This can range from playground taunts, to extreme racial discrimination based on skin colour: "...student call me black guy, black c**t and teacher told me if they call you black c**t you should've gone to the office and tell them..." (Altair). Strategies to cope with verbal abuse varied, with some students reporting the incidents. Altair, felt comfortable in approaching teaching and administration staff, however this feeling was not unanimous with statements such as "I don't want any trouble" common when reporting to administration staff (Amina):

They [Australians] say 'F***in' African, go back to your country'...they think that I can't understand in English. When I come back I ask Miss Moore*, if they say to me about that, she say 'Do you want to go to the office?' I say 'No, I don't want any trouble'. And when I get back to the class again, they say 'F***in' African, go back to your country'. I ask them, I ask them, 'Even you, this is not your country, you stole it from the Aboriginal'. They never told me again 'F***in' African, and stuff like that again.

Amina attempted to empower herself by approaching Miss Moore* to rectify the situation. The teacher did not follow up this racial bullying. Instead, retaliation proved to be effective. Amina also described an incident of physical abuse instigated by her peers in an attempt to make her react verbally for their own amusement: "...they throw rubbish to me... I ask them why you throw it? ...they want to see how I speak to them..." (Amina). Participants found not reacting verbally to these taunts was most effective in reducing the frequency of this abuse. Male participants reacted differently to confrontation, with males opting for a physical response: "...one guy from Australian, he try to react me, and push me, and I had a fight" (Altair). Within Australia, responding physically is not an acceptable response. Altair indicated that he was unaware of the social and institutional norms of NSSHS: "I was new, I don't know what's going on is this school, and what's going on with him, and then I just fought" (Altair). Altair was later informed by the administration team regarding the 'right' way to handle a physical 'challenge' within the schooling context: "...next time, they told me you don't have to do that, you have to come straight to the office..."

Differing responses to confrontation between the sexes was linked to previous normative gender roles in Northern Africa. Over time, the participants' responses to discrimination changed as they began to adapt and become more confident in the new context. Ultimately, being exposed to the discursive practices at NSSHS enabled the participants to 'appropriately' react when confronted with discrimination, or small scale harassment.

Conclusion: the school as a socio-emotional domain

The school as a social institution has equipped these five students with particular technologies in order to negotiate their school and civic identity. Participants surveyed their peers, used trial and error, listened, practiced, and used mimicry in order to 'adapt' and 'belong'. Students have come to know themselves in the ways that social norms manifest in the school construct them as 'other'. They have also identified particular social practices, which have marginalised and 'othered' and those that have given them power. The participants sought to align or distinguish themselves against the normative values, behaviours and 'ways of being' within the discourse (NSSHS). Participants indicated that their knowledge of themselves, and others, has developed from a point of 'difference' to ways of 'seeing' the characteristics of the 'Australian' student and the diversity within their 'white' peers.

Students' ability to effectively communicate and make social connections was hindered by a poor understanding of the Australian vernacular. The participants privileged observation, peer conversation and interaction through sport and social media as ways to 'learn' how to make social connections. One of the hardest areas to negotiate, noted by all participants, was divergent religious beliefs, particularly as religion was valued as a cornerstone of their sense of 'self'. Exposure to alternative religious beliefs of their peers provided participants with a broader outlook, enabling them to establish connections outside of previous cultural boundaries.

Implications for supporting refugee students as social subjects

These findings have implications for refugee students in Australian schools. Refugee students require explicit instructions regarding Australian vernacular, gender roles, rules and social interactions to ensure they have an adequate knowledge base to achieve membership and belonging. Whole school approaches in inclusivity also need to be considered. Participants indicated explicit instruction enabled them to unpack what constituted their 'new' context and then, once empowered, appropriately began to adapt to the social discourse and achieve belonging. This study has highlighted the experiences of Amina, Aisha, Altair, Ahmed and Tareef, and as such, has given voice to the lived social experiences of these North African refugee youths. The experiences of this marginalised group provide insights and considerations for 'transition' support programs, educational policy, school organisation, and the ways in which social practices constitute and accommodate difference in schools.

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