

Educating Muslims in an East African US charter high school

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of a U.S. charter high school that was created by an East African community seeking a learning environment for immigrant adolescents committed to an Islamic lifestyle. It describes how such schools are a reaction to concerns from Muslim immigrant parents and community leaders that youth are experiencing rapid assimilation at school and are replacing their ethnic and religious identity with an other-imposed racialized identity. Through an analysis of teacher interviews, this article explores how the school serves as an oasis for Muslim youth who wish to maintain an Islamic lifestyle and resist the powerful social pressures to assimilate. It also uncovers some of the challenges presented by having a teaching staff with a range of teaching philosophies, background experiences and cultures. Finally, this study reveals some problematic differences between the cultural and educational norms and expectations of the white teachers and the East African leadership. In the end, this case study emphasizes the critical need for a meaningful and productive dialogue about culture, teaching, and learning between all stakeholders in the school's operation and success.

Introduction

Parents have reasonable fears about losing their kids because the schooling here is different from what they received and the influences are different; you could lose your identity.

(Hamda, a Somali teen, quoted in *Muslims in the Diaspora* by Rima Berns McGown)

The United States has resettled many Muslim refugees and immigrants. As the quote above illustrates, the most difficult aspects of this resettlement for Muslim families is following Islam in a predominantly Judeo-Christian society (Berns McGown, 1999, p. 101). For Muslim adolescent newcomers, the tensions are particularly acute because their family and community often espouse beliefs that are in direct conflict with the US adolescent cultures of, for example, dating, entertainment and dress. Schools are the key sites of this tension and often a place of rapid assimilation (Olneck, 2003) as opposed to a more culturally thoughtful adaptation process (Bhatia & Ram, 2004; Gibson, 1988). Muslim families are aware of the challenges youth face at school and often seek out schools that give attention to their culture, language, and history (Merry, 2005).

Muslim families often see Islamic schools as essential for the religious instruction of their children as well as for their cultural survival (Haw, 1994; 1998). Strong cultural links both inside and outside of school supports immigrants' cultural continuity (Portes & Zhou, 1993), which in turn helps youth and their families resist the powerful assimilation process that occurs at typical public schools. Some families opt to place their children in private Islamic schools (Sachs, Nov. 10, 1998). Many Muslim families in the United States, however, cannot afford private Islamic schools or they are not available to them where they live. Typically, their only

choice is to place their children in public schools. In some U.S. cities, there may be the option of placing children in charter schools. Charter schools are small and are typically created around a particular educational purpose (e.g., technology, medical careers, classical curriculum). They often cater to the specific interests of a community. Charter schools are public schools that have a great deal of curricular and structural independence but at the same time receive some government funding, so they are free for students. The present study was conducted in one such charter high school created by members of a large East African community, in a Midwestern US city. The school has attracted mainly Somali Muslim students.

Religion and race are often brought into stark relief because of specific social, political or historical events. The presence of Somali refugees in this city was the result of the Somali civil war which displaced hundreds of thousands of Somali citizens to neighboring countries and refugee camps. The state where this study takes place boasts the largest Somali population (about 40,000ⁱ) in the United States, largely as a result of the presence of organized refugee services and employment opportunities. As the Somali population has grown over the past ten years, this city has become a site of secondary migration due to the draw of a large and now established co-ethnic community. Nevertheless, the dominant society in this context is Eurocentric and overwhelmingly Judeo-Christian. The implications of these facts will be reviewed in order to understand the educational issues faced by Muslim students in this setting.

Race and Somali Identity

Somalis and other black immigrants, upon settling in the United States, suddenly become minoritized.ⁱⁱ Border-crossing has a powerful impact on black immigrants to the United States. Somali immigrants are likely come to the United States with a strong ethnic, religious or national identity, but quickly develop a *racial* identity in the U.S. context. This is the result of the ways

race, racism and racialization are part of U.S. social institutions (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Omi & Winant, 1994; Rong & Brown, 2002; Tuan, 1998). As Lee (2005) points out, when Asian or black immigrants' experience the dominant society, they "undergo a process of racialization and become racialized. That is, they become racial minorities" (p. 3). Ibrahim (1999) and Bashir-Ali (2006) offer empirical evidence of this in cases where immigrant high school youth adopt hip-hop styles and speak English using an African American Vernacular.

Somali immigrants' "racial and ethnic identities crosscut and compete with each other for dominance, with race almost always overriding ethnicity" (Tuan, 1998, p. 22) from the perspective of both the dominant society as well as from the perspectives of immigrants. Thus, while a first generation Somali immigrant may wish to be identified as "Somali" or "Somali American" they are more likely to be identified as "Black" or "African American" by others, as has been the case of other black immigrants to the United States (e.g., Lopez, 2003; Vickerman, 1999; Woldemikael, 1989a, 1989b). Therefore, the ethnicity of Somali immigrants becomes a socially imposed racial-ethnic identity: while ethnic identity may be an option in their private lives, in their public lives, ethnic identity is far from voluntary. Just as African immigrant adults are experiencing these processes of racialization as they adapt to life in the United States, youth are in schools experiencing the same things, often in more dramatic and accelerated ways.

Religion and Somali Identity

In addition to a strong ethnic identity, Somali immigrant youth have unique religious and gendered identities (Zine, 2001) that mediate the constructed and co-constructed processes of racialization. Becoming a visible religious minority is as much of a shock for immigrant families as suddenly becoming a visible racial minority. However, the experience of becoming a visible

religious minority is largely an experience Somali women have because they wear a headscarf or *hijab*. The hijab can also serve as a way to contest their coerced identity as “Black.” This occurs because of the large Somali population in this specific city and the fact that most Muslims are “foreign” not “Black.” Thus, the ways in which race is shaped by ethnicity, gender, religion and other markers of difference test the assumption of a common experience within and across racial groups (Hune, 2000).

School in the United States is quite different from in Somalia. Somalis often recall their schooldays as being divided between time with the *dugsi* (religious tutor) and time on school subjects. For many diaspora Somalis, it seems strange to consider Qur’anic education as something that has to be incorporated into extracurricular activities (Berns McGown, 1999). The United States, however, is bound by a constitution that separates church and state. The first amendment of the U.S. Constitution, added in 1791, reads “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This simple declaration has been the impetus for great debate in public schools about how to treat topics such as school prayer, evolution, and religious holidays. Guidelines for schools make it clear that the public should remain free from government sponsored religion but that students are allowed to express their personal religious views. Therefore, students may wear religious garb and may pray during the school day when not engaged in school activities or instruction; however, school administrators and teachers may not organize or encourage prayer exercises or lead students in any religious activities because this could be seen as religious coercion.ⁱⁱⁱ

These principles may seem simple; however, many accounts from Muslim students suggest that Islam is not always welcomed or religious beliefs accommodated in the public schools. There is much research documenting the struggles Muslim students have had in

attending schools that are part of a secular national education system (Bartels, 2005; Gilbert, 2004; Zine, 2001). Many students report feeling tensions at public schools when they try to follow an Islamic lifestyle.

Hostility and Islamaphobia toward Muslim students at school, as well as the challenges of maintaining a Muslim identity in public schools, have encouraged the creation of Islamic schools that attract a student population from Muslim immigrant communities. While these schools may be preferred by many parents, it is more likely that they will send their children to public schools in the United States due to lack of availability of an Islamic school or due to the costs of a private school. In some rare cases, parents may have the option of sending their children to a charter school. This article aims to explore the case of a charter school, which we will call Kalsami High School (a pseudonym^{iv}), created for East African Muslim immigrant adolescents. It was conceptualized and created by East African parents and community members and, from the outset, sought to be a culturally appropriate and academically challenging alternative to the large public high schools which most other immigrant youth attend. The research questions to be explored in this study are as follows:

1. As a public high school, how does Kalsami High School accommodate Muslim students?
2. What are the cultural and academic implications of learning and teaching in this environment?

The Study

Methodology and Data Sources

The study used a qualitative case study methodology with the bounded unit (Yin, 2003) being Kalsami High School. The primary data source was transcriptions of 10 semi-structured interviews with staff members at Kalsami High School. The interviews took place during the

late fall and early winter of the school's second year of operation. In all, six White teachers and four East African educators were interviewed. This sample includes the majority of the staff at the school. The interview data were complemented by site observations, school documents, and newspaper articles about the school. Therefore, triangulation occurred within and between all data sources to increase the credibility of the research (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). The dependability of the analysis was achieved using member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), peer examination, and a code-recode strategy (Anfara et al., 2002).

The Context

Kalsami High School has as its mission "to provide immigrant and refugee students with a rigorous, academic high school education that will prepare them for college." The charter school was created by East African elders and community members as a response to community parents' desire to have their children schooled in a way that reinforced their religious and cultural values. The community origin is reflected in a predominantly Somali school board (85%), an administrative team that, at the time of the study, consisted of one Somali administrator, one U.S.-born administrator, a Somali parent liaison and three East African educators, the majority of whom are from Somalia. The remaining staff members were eight White, U.S.-born teachers, seven of whom were female.

There are 175 students enrolled at Kalsami High School. The school predominantly serves Somali students born in Somalia or African refugee camps, but also serves other students of East African descent and a small number of students from the Middle East. Some students have spent nearly all of their lives in the United States, while others arrived within the past year. Students come to Kalsami High School with English language skills that range from the beginning through advanced levels. Students who are new to the country often came directly

from a refugee camp and have had little or no previous formal schooling. Attending a school with peers of similar backgrounds provided students with a comfortable cultural learning environment. As one U.S.-born teacher said of the educational climate at Kalsami High School, students “feel free to speak their native language and practice religious and cultural traditions without being ostracized by other students.” Many of the teachers described the school as “a family.”

Participants

The participants in the study were eight teachers (6 White female; 2 Somali male), a Somali Parent Liaison (male) and a Somali Educational Assistant (male). All of the White female teachers held teaching licenses in their subjects.. The two Somali teachers held advanced degrees in their subjects, had taught overseas at the post-secondary level, and were in the process of obtaining state licensure. Formal training to work with English language learners among the staff ranged from no training to master’s degrees on the topic. With the exception of one novice teacher, the teaching staff had between 6 and 20 years of teaching experience, albeit in a range of secondary and post-secondary settings.

Results

Accommodating Muslim Students in an East African Charter High School

Several features of the school reflect the Muslim background of the students. There are specific prayer rooms made available to the students and staff, and school officially breaks to make time for prayer throughout the day. Although Islam cannot be promoted by school personnel, a few parents perform the *salah* (prayer) in the building on Friday afternoons which students are invited to attend. The school’s schedule accommodates this by ending classes early on Fridays such that the services occur outside of class time – a requirement for following the

first amendment religion clauses. In the cafeteria, *halal* meals are served to students and staff. There is no dress code; however, out of deference to their religious beliefs, all female students at Kalsami High School—unlike their counterparts at public schools—wear a full *hijabs*.

Other features of the school also reflect Muslim students' beliefs and practices. For example, students are separated by gender for physical education classes. This allows girls to engage in physical activity and not have contact with boys. Students are also segregated by gender for health education classes. Another way the school attempts to be culturally responsive is to offer Arabic as a foreign language. In addition, because of Islamic prohibitions regarding artistic and musical representations, teachers tend not to use artwork or music as teaching tools at Kalsami High School.

The school environment supports Muslim students' commitment to maintaining a Somali ethnic and national identity by employing a number of Somali staff members who serve as teachers, Muslim role models, counselors, and cultural consultants to U.S.-born teachers. They often act as parents to students who do not live with their families. The Somali teaching staff provides bilingual support for students with limited English proficiency. The school welcomes Somali parents and elders and they are often seen sitting in the hallways throughout the school day. The parents seem to monitor student behavior and support the students in the school. Ahmed, the parent liaison at the school, noted the close relationship between newly immigrated students and their East African teachers: "They are still in their back home culture, which is 'Teacher, you are a parent' . . . The teacher will never say 'I will call your parent!' – he will *be* the parent." One of the classroom teachers described how newcomer students, especially, would avoid eye contact when he talked to them: "They are respecting you. They are listening to you. They are thinking that you are their parents."

One Somali teacher stressed the importance of the shared cultural and religious identity between the students and many of the staff. A U.S.-born teacher noted that “students are able to feel safe and secure because they understand each others’ cultures. Students can come out of their shell, ask questions, speak in front of others—skills that they need to use in the future.” A Somali teacher added his perception that new East African students especially tend to become lost in large public U.S. high schools, resulting in high dropout rates. He said,

Many people come from East Africa, you see them downtown. They became frustrated with the [public] school system and became dropouts. Their parents are not educated. They are the population who came here from the countryside. Some of them never saw [even] the main towns of Somalia. One student said, ‘Teacher, I came from the bush. I was a herder. My sister sent me a ticket to Kenya and then to here.’ Imagine the shock he will face here. He came from only trees and sleeping on the ground and small houses made from trees. And now he has skyscrapers and TV. When we was in a school with 1000 Black and White American students with consistent educational backgrounds . . .he will face a lot of problems. Then maybe he becomes a dropout. And when he drops out of school, he will be a dropout of home as well. So this school is more beneficial.

The comfort of the school for students and parents was reflected through many teachers’ stories of compliments they hear from parents. One parent shared with a Somali staff member how thankful he was for the school. The parent shared that his daughter “had never been happy, never been accepted in other schools—but had never missed a day at Kalsami High School.”

Abukar, another teacher, described how pleased parents were with the environment that helped students retain their cultural and religious backgrounds:

Parents are very happy with their children in this school. They come here and can keep their culture for a while. Their behavior, their dress, and other things. They will become acculturated early on, but for now, keeping their culture full time until they are mature and can see what is right and what is wrong.

These features of Kalsami High School create a learning environment that is not only welcoming to Muslim adolescents and the larger Somali community, but in many ways mirrors an Islamic school.

Nevertheless, because the school receives U.S. government funding, it must remain within the parameters of the first amendment. While the practices listed above do not necessarily promote Islam, the interviews with staff members did raise some concerns. Amy, a White teacher, told about one of her students: “I have one Christian who covers her head because she doesn’t want to look like the whore of Babylon.” Another teacher told us about a girl who came to school with a partial hijab and was “chastised by another girl.” The teachers were disturbed by these comments, stressing that the vision of the school was to provide a cultural space where religious expression was allowed, not to engender a religiously oppressive community.

Academic Mission

A school such as Kalsami High School is very uncommon in the United States. There were a number of academic, social, racial, religious and cultural layers that needed to be peeled away to comprehend its complexity. To begin to understand the school, the second research question explored cultural and academic implications of learning and teaching in this environment.

The interview data revealed considerable disagreement between the East African stakeholders and staff on one hand, and the U.S.-born teachers on the other, surrounding the school's academic vision and its enactment. The academic mission reflected the East African board members' and administrators' desire for students to have a culturally supportive learning environment that would give them the academic experiences necessary to graduate with the credits needed to matriculate into a four-year college. This vision has a number of consequences. For example, all students have the same course schedule. They take 4 years each of Arabic, Science, Mathematics, Language Arts, and Social Studies—as well as credits in health, physical education, and ESL (English as a Second Language). The sole differentiation for newcomer students (recent immigrants with low levels of literacy and little prior schooling) is that they are taught Language Arts and Social Studies by an ESL teacher. In other words, all of the students have a college preparatory curriculum, regardless of time of arrival or post-secondary goals. A vision for tailoring a curriculum for a range of post-secondary options has not been a point of discussion among the board members or the school leadership, but is beginning to be debated among the teaching staff.

Many of the East African staff and administrators see the academic program as appropriate in that it “weeds out” the students who do not really want to work hard. The program matches their single view of schooling as preparation for college and reinforces the view of education as a privilege and reward for hard workers. The U.S.-born teachers agree that the school does not serve the less motivated students. They regard the school's academic plan as elitist and naïve, failing to enact a broader purpose of education: to prepare students for all aspects of life – for college, vocational or technical school, work, or family/community life. This view has developed as the U.S.-born teachers work with the older recently arrived refugees,

many of whom came with limited prior schooling, limited literacy in their home language, and limited English skills. These teachers do not believe that *all* of these students should strive to attain college preparatory status by the time they reach graduation age (21 years). Realistically, this would involve doing the equivalent of 13 years of schooling in one or two years. The U.S.-born teachers fear that many students will complete their years at Kalsami High School without getting the credits or skills they need because the coursework outstrips their language ability. They also fear that students who leave Kalsami High School because of academic failure will enroll in a public school or another charter school that does not have the supportive resources that Kalsami High School has. As a result, the U.S.-born teachers express worries that some of the students are likely not to graduate *and* not get the skills they need for non-academic uses of a high school education.

Isolation or Separation

Kalsami High School is lauded by staff and parents for its strength in supporting and preserving an Islamic lifestyle and East African cultures and languages. The school allows students to study and grow in an environment that supports their English language development and protects them—as many teachers and parents perceive—from the harmful influences of non-Muslim, non-East African cultural groups in U.S. schools. Yet, East African and U.S.-born teachers alike identified the lack of interaction with teens from other racial and cultural groups to be one of the school’s greatest weaknesses. Because students from Kalsami High School will need to be able to effectively interact with co-workers, students, neighbors, clients, and other people from many different cultures in their lives after high school, the staff saw a critical need for students to learn the cultural expectations and norms of the varied membership of U.S. society. Religious tolerance, holidays, accepted patterns of interaction between people (male

female, older-younger) were some of the values and norms that teachers expressed a need for their students to learn.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

In a school with such a culturally homogenous population and so many adults from the East African cultural community, opportunities abound for teachers to capitalize on students' funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and to engage them in culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teachers shared stories that showed a range of incorporation of these tools. Some teachers gave responses that indicated that little if any of their instruction incorporated references to students' current lives or backgrounds. When explicitly asked if she found that references to Somali culture came up in her classroom, Veronica, a White science teacher responded, "They don't come up as often as I would like. A lot of it has to do with the subject matter—its pretty cut and dried." She and some of the other teachers failed to see anything culturally implicit about their "cut and dried" content and did not see any way to intersect their lessons with the students' lives.

Several other teachers, however, highlighted the importance of incorporating students' culture into their curriculum and instruction. Many of the East African teachers stressed the need for teachers to understand students' cultures, strengths, and backgrounds in order to engage them in learning. Mohammed, a teacher originally from Somalia, described in detail how he taught chemical concepts by connecting them to farming practices, to raising babies, and to nutrients in traditional Somali foods. Recognizing the importance of culture to learning was not limited to the Somali staff. A common theme among many U.S.-born teachers was the gains in learning they saw when they tapped into students' strengths and culture. For example, Anne, a White English teacher, described teaching language arts skills using student's oral tradition:

You play to their strengths. They like to talk, so we discuss a lot. Story-telling is also a big part of their culture. I like to make them bridge between story-telling and writing an essay. I have them write a story about a topic, then I have them change that story into the [writing] format that we accept.

Other teachers shared stories of aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy in their teaching, but most—including the East African staff—indicated that they wanted to develop more ways to tap into the cultural resources of their students and to translate this knowledge into culturally responsive learning events.

Cultural Tensions

While the call for more interaction between Kalsami School students and other non-Somali teens was sounded loudly and often, U.S.-born teachers saw the potential for much more learning of American cultural norms even within the school. The teachers felt that they could play a much bigger role as cultural brokers between the students and the broader American society. This issue surfaced when the teachers were asked what the drawbacks were of having a culturally homogenous student population. Amy, a White English teacher of newcomer students said,

It makes me tired that I have to be the diversity, quite frankly. When I had a group from all over the world, it didn't bother me to be the only White person, where in this context I'm always the one who has to be wrong. I have to be the lone voice that says, 'This is how we do things here.'

Anne concurred by saying:

What they see of [state] culture and US culture is, if there is one, is really just commercial. They don't see a lot of art, or music that isn't hip hop. I think they even

shop exclusively at the Somali Mall or the [Super] Mall. They see a very limited slice of what life is in this country. I'm not completely okay with how little knowledge we give them of [U.S. culture].

A second cultural tension between U.S.-born and East African teachers at Kalsami High School arises from the disciplinary expectations and strategies of the teachers. The U.S.-born teachers bring with them experience managing large U.S. classrooms. They shared some frustration with classroom behavior, but expressed much more frustration with the school's individualistic and varied way of dealing with students referred to the office for infractions. These teachers held expectations of a fair and equal behavior management plan for the school. The East African staff, including the parent liaison and the East African administrator, shared a much different interpretation of appropriate behavior management. They prefer to deal with student behavior issues on a case-by-case basis, using relationships with the parents to encourage appropriate behavior out of the students. They seek to establish better parent connections as a way to develop better individual student behavior. They also favor a "three strikes and you're out" policy that speeds the movement of misbehaving students out of their school permanently.

It is noteworthy that disagreements about disciplinary procedures typically involve the transfer students, not the newcomers. All of the teachers perceived the newcomers to have higher motivation and greater respect for teachers. This behavior received much positive regard from the U.S.-born teachers and, for the East African teachers, served to exemplify the type of behavior expected of all students. This finding suggests that the students who are coming from other schools and have been in the United States longer display behaviors that garner little respect or positive regard from the staff. It seems that they are perceived as "damaged" from

their previous schooling experiences. These perspectives are mirrored in Stacy Lee's (2005) and Angela Valenzuela's (1999) research on other immigrant populations.

Although the newcomers received much praise, some of the White teachers mentioned surprise at how conservative some of the students' interpretation of Islam was. Other teachers told about how they came to understand that school played a secondary role in students' lives to Islam. They found it challenging to raise the importance of education in the students' priorities. Amy said, "[The newcomers] are not representative of Somali culture as a whole. The outward trappings of their religion are so important to them." The fact that the East African teachers did not mention this as a surprise is noteworthy in that they seem to relate easily to the newcomers in terms of this world view. What the East African teachers found challenging was understanding how to cope with the instructional needs of adolescents with little or no prior schooling.

Perhaps the most evident cultural tension voiced by the U.S.-born staff was their perception of how their training and expertise was viewed by the East African school decision makers. The women attribute this tension to a lack of common educational training, experience, and the yet-illusory philosophical common ground about educating immigrant youth. While the U.S.-born, licensed teachers see a great need for their input into academic and policy plans, their input is neither sought nor acted upon. Teachers offered two different interpretations. One was that they were not included in the decision-making loop because they were women, and women hold lower status in Islamic and Somali cultures. The other interpretation was that their ideas were not valued because they were not Muslim or Somali. One teacher told us:

I don't mean to unfairly bash the school board - I think it's wonderful that Somali community members have a guiding hand in the education of their children in this country. However, the balance of power on the school

board under-represents the American host culture. There are a number of Somali staff and many students who seem to be truly bicultural - able to pick and choose elements from Somali and American culture and have an unthreatened appreciation for both. These people are not represented on the school board. I understand that the threat of culture and language loss is real. But because decision-makers lack an understanding of American culture and how education is done here, much is resisted that is necessary to function properly as a school.

While the U.S.-born teachers see themselves as experts on education in the U.S., and—in the case of the ESL teachers, on English language acquisition—they feel that their expertise is dismissed by the administrators and the predominantly East African board. The teachers point out that they are teaching in the United States, not in Somalia, and that students in the United States have different needs, experiences, attitudes than students may have had in Somalia. U.S.-born teachers expected to accommodate Muslim students when they joined the teaching staff, but assumed that their ideas would be valued among their colleagues. The U.S.-born teachers feel, in general, that they have given much more consideration and respect for East African culture than has been shown for their own culture and professional status.

The views of the U.S.-born teachers seem to traverse between concern for preparing all of the students for the realities that await them beyond high school and navigating the complex cultural milieu at the Kalsami High School as minoritized teachers. These cultural and philosophical tensions may have been unanticipated outcomes of hiring a diverse teaching staff.

Conclusion

Kalsami High School is, in many ways, an oasis for Muslim youth who wish to maintain an Islamic lifestyle and resist the powerful social pressures to assimilate. The school allows immigrant youth the option to slow the process of adopting a racialized identity while making their religious identity less visible. The school has accommodated Islamic norms as fully as possible within a public school setting where the U.S. Constitution must be honored in order to receive government funding.

Kalsami High School is also a teaching and learning community working very hard to confront students' academic challenges and goals. This study reveals that the difficulty of meeting the academic needs of two very distinct populations – newcomers and transfer students – is pedagogically very complex. Newcomers with limited formal schooling seem to have an impossibly short amount of time to meet graduation requirements; transfer students seem to continue to have gaps in their prior schooling. Both have urgent needs to develop academic literacy and oral language skills while learning high-school level content.

The study surfaced frustrations from the U.S.-born teaching staff toward the academic, organizational, and decision-making structures of the school that are dominated by East African values. These frustrations appear to be rooted in and exacerbated by the differences between the cultural and educational norms and expectations of the U.S.-born teachers and the East African leadership. Disagreement surfaced among staff along cultural lines about the mission of the school and how the instruction and curriculum should be differentiated. These conversations have led to the minoritized U.S. born teachers feeling dismissed in most decision-making processes. We contend that this frustration has led to their resistance to tap into students' and staff members' funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) and to subsequently employ culturally relevant pedagogical strategies (Ladson-Billings, 1994). We argue that the

school urgently needs to develop a strong infrastructure for sharing and championing the expertise of all staff. We emphasize the critical need for a meaningful and productive dialogue about culture, teaching, and learning between all stakeholders in the school's operation and success. Furthermore, we extend these recommendations to all schools, arguing that the education of all students suffer in a variety of ways when teachers feel that their culture and expertise are undervalued.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by the types of data collected as well as the duration of the research. It would be beneficial to continue this inquiry by doing more classroom observations that span a number of weeks and interviews that add student and parent perspectives. It would be valuable to hold more follow-up interviews and perhaps some focus groups to glean more information from teachers about their teaching experiences and working relationships, particularly with regard to the staffs' cultural/philosophical tensions. Seeing as the study was conducted during the school's second year of operation, it would be meaningful to observe how these tensions eased or changed over time. The research is also limited by the perspectives of the researchers. Basford and Hick, who collected the data, are White females who are licensed high school teachers and as such are likely to have felt much commonality with the White female teachers at the school. Such possible biases and backgrounds should not, however, stop researchers from working in settings such as Kalsami High School. With rigorous and respectful research practices, it is possible to open up spaces where underrepresented settings and viewpoints are brought to light (Haw, 1996), which is what this study hoped to accomplish.

Future research should include close examination of how students with minoritized religious beliefs are welcomed in more mainstream public schools. It is essential to identify how

accommodating Muslim youth is done well because most Muslim students remain in educational settings where they experience cultural and racial injustices. Inservice and preservice teachers need assistance in imagining schools where religious identities are allowed as well as in envisioning their role as teachers who create safe learning places for a wide range of diversity among their student body, including religious diversity. Finally, educators need to be more critical of the static and simplistic identity categories commonly used to label Muslim students. Muslim students, like all students, can engage in a multiplicity of identities, in an on-going process of embracing, disavowing, belonging, contesting and competing identities (Yon, 2000). While identity labels can enable and empower, they can also limit us by prescribing and restricting a full understanding of our students.

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ⁱ The size of refugee communities is notoriously difficult to measure due to inaccurate census data gathered in apartment buildings with occupancy limits as well as changing immigration policies and fluctuating secondary immigration patterns.

ⁱⁱ In using the term “minoritized” instead of “minority”, we follow Jasmin Zine’s (2001) argument that this term denotes the many factors in a society that serve to marginalize and categorize people.

ⁱⁱⁱ See http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/religionandschools/prayer_guidance.html for more information about the religious clauses of the first amendment and U.S. public schools. Also see Haynes (1998) for ways public schools are advised to accommodate Muslim students.

^{iv} Kalsami is a Somali word meaning trust or confidence. We chose the word to symbolize the trust parents place in the school.