Clark Scholars Research Statement

PROPOSAL #71

The Role of Cultural Phenomena in Shaping Academic Engagement:
The Case of African Refugee High School Youth in Vermont

Purpose and Significance

The achievement gap of English Language Learners continues to be a critical problem in the U.S. (Ortiz & Pagan, 2009). Ortiz and Pagan observed, schools that serve refugee populations are challenged to make schools effective for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Refugee students represent a diverse set of cultures, yet research is limited in understanding how the achievement gap plays out in particular cultural groups such as African refugee students and how specific cultural phenomena (e.g. African cultural practices, core American cultural values, school culture specific to diversity and inclusion, youth culture and identity, and home beliefs and dispositions about schooling) relate to the persistent achievement gap. Therefore, the purpose of the proposed study will provide insight into how the aforementioned cultural phenomena interact to shape academic engagement among African refugee youth at a particular high school.

Conceptual Framework

Among the general theoretical explanations for persistent scholastic failure of students, as measured by school-based assessments in today’s American public schools, is the role that student engagement plays in academic achievement (Lee & Shute, 2009). Lee and Shute (2009) suggest that non-cognitive domains such as student engagement, i.e. the behavioral, emotional, and affective characteristics of students (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004) were strongly predictive of academic achievement. This observation suggests that before these refugee youth can show improved academic achievement, educational leadership should be concerned with enhancing their academic engagement. In this study, I examine how academic engagement is mediated by multiple cultural phenomena that figure in the social and academic lives of African refugee youth.

Research Questions

To serve the above purpose, the study seeks to answer the following questions: 1) What is the nature of the different cultural phenomena (African cultural practices; American cultural values; school cultural practices; youth culture and identity, and home beliefs and dispositions about schooling) that play out in the social and academic lives of African refugee students in one particular high school?; 2) What is the nature of academic engagement among African refugee high school youth?; and 3) How do African refugee students interact with, and make sense of these cultural phenomena within the context of academic engagement?

Study Context
Since 1980, over 5,600 refugees have been resettled in the Chittenden county region of Vermont (Leahy, 2011). These refugees have arrived from all over the world including the former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. However, refugees resettled to Vermont and several other parts of the U.S. in the last 10 years have predominantly come from the African nations of Burundi, Congo, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Sudan (BRYCS, 2009; Leahy, 2011), and this trend is expected to continue (BRYCS, 2009; Leahy, 2011). In the district that I plan to study, African refugee students constitute the highest population of students of color, the highest population of English Language Learners (ELLs), and are persistently among the lowest scholastic achievers (BRYCS, 2009; Leahy, 2011) making it an ideal setting for the study.

**Methodology**

I will use naturalistic inquiry because it enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of phenomena that are unknown (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). In particular, I plan to use a qualitative case study design since it provides a way to study several individual cases with multiple boundaries, such as a student’s home culture (Yin, 2003). This multiple case approach can provide insight into the phenomenon of interest; in this case academic engagement (Yin, 2003). My sampling approach will utilize criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) to select eight ethnically diverse African refugee youth. I will recruit four males and four females from cultural backgrounds that represent the cultural diversity of the school district. Proposed data collection and analysis procedures are summarized in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Data</th>
<th>Collection Technique</th>
<th>Mode of Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature of academic engagement</td>
<td>In-depth interviews with participants; observations in classrooms, study halls, participants' homes during after-school hours; analysis of participants' school work samples; audio-record interviews and transcribed field notes</td>
<td>Coding the data to the theoretical behavioral, emotional, and affective characteristics of academic engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature and influence of African cultural practices on engagement</td>
<td>Initial literature review; myself being an African researcher as an instrument; use of theoretical knowledge to conduct in-depth interview with participants; observations of participants at school and in homes; audio-record interviews and transcribed field notes</td>
<td>Coding the data to the theoretical themes of African values, and their relationship to the three aspects of student engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature and influence of core American cultural values</td>
<td>Initial literature review; use of theoretical knowledge to conduct in-depth interview with participants; audio-record interviews and transcribed field notes</td>
<td>Coding the data to the theoretical themes of core American values, and their relationship to the three aspects of student engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature and influence of school culture specific to diversity and inclusion at BHS</td>
<td>Review of relevant school artifacts to determine coverage of diversity values; observe lessons for teacher's application of diversity values; in-depth interviews with participants on appreciation of school culture and link to their engagement; audio-record interviews and transcribed field notes</td>
<td>Coding the data to identify themes of school culture specific to diversity values and their relationship to the three aspects of student engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature and influence of youth culture and peer identity</td>
<td>Initial literature review on youth culture; in-depth interviews with participants to understand levels of identification with, and participation in peer groups; observe and participate in peer gatherings; audio-record interviews and transcribed field notes</td>
<td>Coding the data to the theoretical themes of youth cultures, and their relationship to the three aspects of student engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nature and influence of home beliefs and dispositions about schooling</td>
<td>Conversational interviews with parents in participants' homes; observation of parents' roles in participants' home work activities; observation of parents' participation in parents' activities at school; transcribed field notes</td>
<td>Coding the data to identify themes of home beliefs and dispositions and their relationship to the three aspects of student engagement</td>
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References


