Sudanese refugee youth and educational success: The role of church and youth group in supporting cultural and academic adjustment and schooling achievement

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ABSTRACT

There is a burgeoning body of research about refugee youth that adopts a deficit approach by focusing on the problems and barriers youth encounter in adjusting culturally and academically to schools. Less research takes an asset approach through an examination of the strengths refugee youth bring to formal schooling and how these assets can be built upon to support academic achievement and cultural adjustment. In this article, we challenge these deficit notions, through examining the everyday spaces inhabited by Sudanese refugee youth living in regional New South Wales, Australia. Our research poses the question: what role do institutions outside school play in supporting Sudanese refugee youth as they move from one culture to another? The question is significant because little research has examined the role played by institutions outside school, e.g., church, youth groups and sporting associations in fostering the social and cultural capital required for refugee youth to integrate within the broader community, and to engage successfully in schooling. Drawing on Bourdieuian concepts of cultural and social capital and habitus, we suggest that religious affiliation enabled the young people to access social capital through “prosocial and proeducational moral directives” (Barrett, 2010; p. 467). Moreover, religious involvement provided refugee youth with access to socially legitimised forms of cultural capital. These forms of capital shaped the students’ habitus and contributed to school adjustment and achievement. We conclude that future research is needed to examine the role that church and other institutions outside school play in contributing to cultural and academic adjustment.

Introduction

The predominantly monocultural face of regional and rural Australia has undergone a major transformation over the past decade. One of the major drivers has been a Federal Government policy to increase humanitarian settlement in regional and rural Australia in order to lessen pressure on services in large urban centres, build a pool of workers to address ongoing labour shortages and contribute to the development of rural and regional Australia (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2005). This policy has been in line with other industrial countries attempting to deal with increasing global flows of refugees and the perception that services in cities are stretched to capacity (Boese, 2010). Settlement of refugees in Australian regions has been discursively framed as meeting refugees’ interests, emphasising the fit between those who come from rural areas or have much-needed skills and educational success.
groups. For instance, building community networks, both social and leisure, has been found to be an important means of overcoming activities and networks may play in the generation of social and cultural capital and educational achievement for disadvantaged as central to teachers (Harris, 2011a, p. 729; Harris, 2011b, p. 217) has documented the potential of collaborative “alternative pedagogies”, between Sudanese female students and their teachers, to “create community change”. A handful of studies has explored whole-of-school approaches which challenge and change structures and programs designed for dominant groups (e.g., Pugh, Ever, & Hattam, 2012; Ferfolja & Naidoo, 2010). Others have examined how schools can model good practice through repositioning refugee students as central to teachers’ work (Taylor & Sidhu, 2011; Vickers & McCarthy, 2010), or explored the understandings that schools have about the critical importance of building social capital to promote integration of refugee students (Smyth, MacBride, Paton, & Sheridan, 2010).

The preceding literature takes school as its primary unit of analysis. A number of studies have examined the role that out-of-school activities and networks may play in the generation of social and cultural capital and educational achievement for disadvantaged groups. For instance, building community networks, both social and leisure, has been found to be an important means of overcoming disadvantage and positively impacting on social and educational outcomes (OECD, 2001). Participating in diverse extracurricular activities increases students’ engagement with schooling (Fullarton, 2002), aspirations and participation (Khoo & Ainley, 2005).
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