

Student Engagement and Academic Performance of Iraqi Refugee Community College Students in America

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Abstract

The framework of culturally relevant pedagogy was used to explore how Iraqi refugee students defined academic success, described their optimal learning environment, and remained engaged in college despite cultural differences. Knowledge gained through this research encourages positive social change to embrace diversity and help newcomers adapt to American educational systems.

Problem

In southern California, a large number of Iraqi refugees are attending the local community college. Currently, limited courses are available that support the language, cultural, and educational differences of this population. If unaddressed, these problems will leave students disadvantaged and unable to complete course requirements, leading to academic failure and eventual withdrawal or dismissal from the college.

In addition to these short term consequences is the more lasting consequence of not being prepared to enter and contribute to the workforce. Therefore, community colleges must consider additions and alternatives to current curriculum and programs to assure student engagement and academic success of Iraqi refugee students.

Gaps in the literature exist about:

- Refugees in adult education
- Their goals and expectations, their needs, their perceptions of college experiences, and their feelings about inclusion or alienation
- Diverse populations in higher education and how to involve them in the discussion of positive change within the learning environment

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to ascertain how student engagement affects academic performance for Iraqi refugees from a southern California community college.

Relevant Literature

Conceptual Framework

Culturally relevant pedagogy (Durdin, 2008; Gay, 2010; Howard, 2003; Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995b, 1999)

The literature reviews indicate that immigrants and refugees:

- Have limited English proficiency (Conway, 2010; Henry, 2009; Kanno & Varghese, 2010)
- Are unfamiliar with American culture in higher education (Davies, 2008; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006)
- Feel unrecognized and perceive unfairness (Cohen, 2007; DeCapua & Marshall, 2010)
- Experience difficulties with adjustment and acculturation in their new environments (Miscampbell, 2007; Wang, 2009)

Solutions indicated in the literature reviews include:

- Increasing student support and addressing the needs of learners (Cortes, 2008; Earnest, Joyce, de Mori, & Silvagni, 2010)
- Building on student's prior experiences (Aboudan, 2011; Gay, 2000; Tan, 2010)
- Increasing faculty support and diversity training (Canniff, 2008; Chicola, 2007)
- Increasing ESL courses (Conway, 2010; Gonzalez, 2010)
- Providing translators (Kodithuwakku, 2010; Rotich, 2009)
- Using student's language within the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Young, 2012)
- Creating specialized orientations and peer mentoring programs (Goldschmidt & Ousey, 2006; Mayhew, Vanderlinden, & Kim, 2010; Strickland, 2009; Yeh, Ching, Okubo, & Luthar, 2007)

Research Questions

1. How do Iraqi refugee students define academic success?
2. How do Iraqi refugee students describe their optimal learning environment?
3. How do Iraqi refugee students remain engaged in community college given cultural differences?

Procedures

Sampling

- Purposeful sampling
- Snowball sampling

Participants

- 8 adult Iraqi refugee students, ranging in age from 20 to 73, who had completed a minimum of one semester and enrolled for a consecutive semester at a southern California community college
- 4 were female and 4 were male

Data Collection

- One-on-one interviews – 60 minutes, audiotaped
- 10 closed-ended questions for background information
- 12 open-ended interview questions
- Academic history
- Email correspondence for additional information and review of transcribed data

Data Analysis

Transcribed data were:

- Manipulated and analyzed by hand and a computer software program ATLAS-ti
- Divided into segments
- Coded
- Categorized into major themes

Findings

Academic Success

Student responses supported the component of academic success. However, students gave insight into barriers to success, specific to the Iraqi population, and offered solutions to eliminate those barriers.

Cultural Competence

Students revealed differences were not always embraced, and teachers did not always use culture to bridge learning. Participant responses implied that by enhancing cultural competence within the college, student engagement would increase.

Limitations

The absence of established or best practices

Low number of participants in the study

Inability to include non-English speaking students

Orientation lacks practice

Conclusions

Participants were pursuing college opportunities and were making an effort to achieve academically. Despite their persistence, however, they continued to experience difficulties with student engagement, academic success, and acculturation.

Support diverse student needs by offering basic skills classes, adding culturally relevant curriculum, and understanding differences in cultures and learning styles.

Add specialized orientation program for refugee students to provide the necessary skills to remain engaged in college, succeed academically, and acculturate to their new country.

Social Change Implications

Knowledge gained through this work will encourage positive social changes to embrace diversity within colleges and help newcomers establish themselves as they adapt to the local community and American educational systems.