

# THE ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT OF NEWLY ARRIVING SOMALI BANTU STUDENTS IN A U.S. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



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# **The Academic Engagement of Newly Arriving Somali Bantu Students in a U.S. Elementary School**

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## Executive Summary

This report examines the findings of a two-year ethnographic study of newly arrived Somali Bantu refugee students in a U.S. elementary school (K-6) in Chicago. The Bantu had been displaced in refugee camps for more than 12 years, and the children had no prior exposure to formal schooling and limited literacy skills. Upon their resettlement in 2004, a number of school districts voiced concerns about meeting the mental health and social adjustment needs of Bantu students and questioned whether local schools were equipped with suitable teaching strategies—all of which inspired the present study, the results of which are being published for the first time here. The authors led a research team that carried out observations of select classrooms (while helping teachers to minimize classroom disruptions) and interviews with school staff, before coding the resulting field notes to identify key themes and patterns.

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These data paint a detailed picture of students' behavioral and academic adjustment to school, and the drivers behind "behavioral incidents" (instances when children's behavior presented a problem for school staff), and their academic engagement or disengagement. Behavioral incidents included disruptive behaviors, complaints about assignments, refusal to participate in the learning process, hoarding of classroom items, and expressions of distress. Such incidents frequently resulted from disengagement from the learning process, which in turn often occurred after a child struggled to grasp unfamiliar academic concepts or terms.

The teachers participating in the study found working with the Somali Bantu students particularly challenging, and often reported feeling ill equipped to cope with their academic and behavioral issues. Researchers identified a number of successful teaching strategies, including relationship building and affirmation, one-on-one attention, and the use of materials to infuse more meaning into learning tasks. Bantu students required a certain degree of flexibility and accommodation from their teachers, whose attitudes toward acculturation could generally be characterized as "assimilationist" (requiring students to obey certain norms and rules) or "multicultural" (emphasizing the importance of learning about students' cultures).

This study illustrates the difficulties faced by refugee students with limited formal education (LFE) when adjusting to U.S. schools, and the pressures placed on teachers and other school staff. These findings extend the literature on the academic engagement of immigrants to this group of LFE refugee students. Many studies that focus on behavioral, cognitive, and personal engagement and their interconnections attribute disengagement to a lack of interest and suggest that behavioral incidents are the product of this disengagement. However, in this study, LFE refugee students were disengaged not because of disinterest but because they were unfamiliar with the culture of schooling. This study also illustrates the need to provide schools with adequate support to successfully accommodate the needs of LFE refugee students.

## I. Introduction

Refugee students with interrupted or limited formal education face particular difficulties in adjusting to



U.S. schools.<sup>1</sup> Many refugee children arrive in the United States after prolonged stays in refugee camps where opportunities for schooling were limited or unavailable. It is estimated that 20 percent of all English Language Learners (ELLs) in high school and 12 percent of ELLs in middle school have missed two or more years of schooling.<sup>2</sup> Such students—defined here as those with limited formal education (LFE)—are at particular risk for poor academic outcomes and behavioral problems, especially if they come from cultures that lack traditions of literacy and formal schooling.<sup>3</sup> Though LFE students represent a growing population in schools in the United States and other resettlement countries, only a few studies to date have documented their school experiences in detail.<sup>4</sup> The study on which this report is based, conducted in a U.S. elementary school (K-6) in Chicago from 2004-06, represents one of them.

The sparse literature on LFE refugee students describes the array of challenges they face adapting to school. At the most basic level, they may not know any of the norms of school behavior. For example, one study found that Hmong refugee children were unfamiliar with expected classroom behaviors or how to perform paper-and-pencil tasks.<sup>5</sup> Even with additional preparation in special newcomer programs, these refugee students can struggle to transition into mainstream schools, as “the knowledge of how to ‘be a student,’ and indeed look like one, entails many skills, behaviors, formative experiences, and a great deal of knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> Teachers who work with LFE refugee students report their difficulties adapting to school, and the resulting effects on their behavior: many are withdrawn, aggressive, unable to concentrate, anxious, or hyperactive.<sup>7</sup>

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LFE refugee students may also struggle to handle the academic material in the classroom.<sup>8</sup> For example, Dooley observed that much of the homework assigned to African refugees was “not doable,” containing concepts and references that were culturally and socially unfamiliar.<sup>9</sup> For LFE students, adapting to school requires not only mastering a new language, but also learning literacy skills and overcoming gaps

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1 Andrea Decapua and Helaine W. Marshall, “Serving ELLs with Limited or Interrupted Education: Intervention that Works,” *TESOL Journal* 1, no. 1 (2010): 49–70; Dina Birman, *Refugee Children with Low Literacy Skills or Interrupted Education: Identifying Challenges and Strategies* (Denver: Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning, 2005), [www.springinstitute.org/Files/refugeechildrenbehavior3.pdf](http://www.springinstitute.org/Files/refugeechildrenbehavior3.pdf).

2 Jorge Ruiz-de-Velasco, Michael E. Fix, and Beatriz Chu Clewell, *Overlooked and Underserved: Immigrant Students in U.S. Secondary Schools* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2000).

3 Dan Van Lehman and Omar Eno, “The Somali Bantu: Their History and Culture” (Culture Profile 16, Center for Applied Linguistics, Cultural Orientation Resource Center, Washington, DC, February 2003), [www.culturalorientation.net/learning/backgrounders](http://www.culturalorientation.net/learning/backgrounders).

4 Doris Walker-Dalhouse and A. Derick Dalhouse, “When Two Elephants Fight the Grass Suffers: Parents and Teachers Working Together to Support the Literacy Development of Sudanese Youth,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 25, no. 2 (2009): 328–35.

5 Beverley Alsleben, “Preliterate English Learners: Refugee Camp to the U.S. Classroom,” *California English* (Summer 2006): 6–8, [www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2335](http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2335); Cynthia H. Brock, “Exploring an English Language Learner’s Literacy Learning Opportunities: A Collaborative Case Study Analysis,” *Urban Education* 42, no. 5 (2007): 470–501.

6 Jenny Miller, Jane Mitchell, and Jill Brown, “African Refugees with Interrupted Schooling in the High School Mainstream: Dilemmas for Teachers and Students,” *Prospect* 20, no. 2 (2005): 19–33.

7 Ibid.

8 Elizabeth Cassity and Greg Gow, “Making up for Lost Time: The Experiences of Young Southern Sudanese Refugees in High Schools,” *Youth Studies Australia* 24, no. 3 (2005): 51–55; Miller, Mitchell, and Brown, “African Refugees with Interrupted Schooling;” Cathryn Driver and Ruth O. Bertran, “Impact of Refugee Trauma on Children’s Occupational Role as School Students,” *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal* 45, no. 1 (1998): 23–38.

9 Karen Dooley, “Re-thinking Pedagogy for Middle School Students with Little, No or Severely Interrupted Schooling,” *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* 8, no. 1 (2009): 5–22, <http://education.waikato.ac.nz/research/files/etpc/files/2009v8n1art1.pdf>.



in knowledge across academic subjects, all at the same time.<sup>10</sup> The existing literature suggests that LFE refugee students are likely to face distinct challenges in adjusting to school—more extreme than those documented for immigrant students, and even some other refugee students.

At the same time, teachers face their own difficulties in working with these students. Mainstream teachers may be unfamiliar with—and even have misconceptions about—ELL experiences and bilingualism.<sup>11</sup> Generally, English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers are more informed about these issues and better prepared; yet they too face numerous challenges, including the need to improvise pedagogical processes without adequate instructional materials.<sup>12</sup> For example, teaching science to LFE students requires teachers to address gaps in literacy, English language skills, and science-specific vocabulary.<sup>13</sup>

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Teachers in U.S. schools with growing ELL populations confront these demands in the context of increased federal and state pressure to raise students' performance on standardized tests. Under the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB), for example, schools' performance is measured by growth in standardized test scores among different populations, including ELLs. Depending on the state, failure to improve the test scores of certain groups can result in sanctions against schools, such as restructuring and changes in management. Standardized tests are not well suited to assess the progress of ELLs, especially that of refugee and LFE students who struggle with basic literacy skills. These challenges and pressures are likely to be even more acute for LFE students coming from “preliterate” societies (i.e., those without written languages), such as the Somali Bantu.<sup>14</sup> Previous research suggests teachers working with the Bantu found the situation frustrating because they lacked adequate support.<sup>15</sup>

With this context in mind, this report offers the first description of the findings of a two-year ethnographic study on the adjustment of newly arriving Somali Bantu refugee students to a U.S. elementary school, and how the school and teachers accommodated the needs of this population.

## II. The Somali Bantu Refugees

Somali Bantu refugees started arriving in the United States in 2004. As the descendants of slaves brought to Somalia in the 1800s, they lived as second-class citizens in agricultural regions, with little access to education. After being displaced by the civil war in Somalia in the early 1990s, they fled to refugee camps

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- 10 Carola Suarez-Orozco, Dina Birman, J. Manuel Casas, Nadine Nakamura, Pratyusha Tummala-Narra, Michael Zarate, and Melba Vasquez, *CROSSROADS: The Psychology of Immigration in the New Century*, Report of the APA Presidential Task Force on Immigration (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2012), [www.apa.org/topics/immigration/report.aspx](http://www.apa.org/topics/immigration/report.aspx).
- 11 Stuart A. Karabenick and Phyllis A. Clemens Noda, “Professional Development Implications of Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes toward English Language Learners,” *Bilingual Research Journal: The Journal of the National Association for Bilingual Education* 28, no. 1 (2004): 55–75.
- 12 Edison J. Trickett, Emma Rukhotskiy, Ansuk Jeong, Ana Genkova, Ashmeet Oberoi, Traci Weinstein, and Yanelet Delgado, “The Kids Are Terrific: It’s the Job That’s Tough’: The ELL Teacher Role in an Urban Context,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 28, no. 2 (2012): 283–92.
- 13 Jennifer Miller, “Teaching Refugee Learners with Interrupted Education in Science: Vocabulary, Literacy and Pedagogy,” *International Journal of Science Education* 31, no. 4 (2009): 571–92.
- 14 Suarez-Orozco, Birman, Casas, Nakamura, Tummala-Narra, Zarate, and Vasquez, *CROSSROADS: The Psychology of Immigration in the New Century*.
- 15 Laura Roy and Kevin Roxas, “Whose Deficit Is This Anyway? Exploring Counter-Stories of Somali Bantu Refugees’ Experiences in ‘Doing School,’” *Harvard Educational Review* 81, no. 3 (2011): 521–42.



in Kenya, where they lived for more than a decade until the United States designated the entire community (numbering approximately 12,000) eligible for resettlement as refugees.

Like many other refugee groups, the Somali Bantu had suffered a great deal prior to their arrival in the United States. They were forced from their homes by Somali clans, and undertook perilous journeys in their escape to Kenya. Once in refugee camps, they survived nighttime raids from bandits while living on meager food rations. Their settlements were located in dangerous areas on the periphery of the camps, and they suffered frequent attacks.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike other refugee groups with stronger educational backgrounds,<sup>17</sup> few of the Somali Bantu were literate in any language.<sup>18</sup> The native Somali Bantu languages have no written form, though many adults speak Somali. The first educational opportunities for most Somali Bantu were available in refugee camps; however, the majority of children in this study did not attend the makeshift schools located there, because their parents viewed this as a waste of time since they would soon be attending schools in the United States.

When Somali Bantu children began arriving in U.S. schools in 2004, teachers and administrators in resettlement communities voiced concerns. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) received numerous requests from school districts seeking information about the Somali Bantu culture, training in handling mental health and social adjustment issues in the classroom, and specific teaching strategies for these students.<sup>19</sup>

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The present study grew out of this concern, and was designed to improve understanding of the challenges faced by Somali Bantu students and their teachers as the students entered a U.S. elementary school in an urban, ethnically diverse neighborhood.

### III. Methods

A systematic study to test existing theories of refugee student adjustment would have been premature because of the lack of research on the relatively new Somali Bantu population in the United States. Instead, this study employed an open-ended inductive ethnographic approach, looking for themes and patterns that emerged while observing how Somali Bantu children adapted to a U.S. school—and how school personnel adapted to them—between fall 2004 and spring 2006. To develop a holistic understanding of student and teacher experiences, the researchers who conducted this study both observed and participated in classroom interactions (helping teachers to limit disruptions), before conducting interviews with teachers and other staff. The authors began by spending two mornings a week in an ESL classroom, and recruited 18 undergraduate fieldworkers when school staff requested more help. As a result, over the course of the two years, from fall of 2004 through spring of 2006, 20 fieldworkers—including the authors and 18 undergraduates—collected field notes at the school. As is true of the authors, many of the under-

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16 Van Lehman and Eno, “The Somali Bantu.”

17 Lynn J. McBrien, “Educational Needs and Barriers for Refugee Children in the United States: A Review of the Literature,” *Review of Educational Research* 75 (3): 329–64.

18 Van Lehman and Eno, “The Somali Bantu.”

19 Authors’ personal communication with Myrna A. Adkins and Burna Dunn of the Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning, 2009; authors’ personal communication with Lyn Morland of Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services (BRYCS), 2009.





graduate fieldworkers were first- or second-generation refugees or immigrants, and some were Muslim and originally from Africa, similar to the Somali Bantu students.

### A. *The Sample*

The study collected observations on 19 of the 33 Somali Bantu refugee students enrolled at the elementary school between 2004 and 2006. These 19 students came from seven families; ten were boys, nine were girls. At the time of enrollment, they were distributed across all the grades, from kindergarten to sixth.<sup>20</sup>

The researchers obtained informed consent from parents verbally, with assistance of a translator. The Institutional Review Board that reviewed the study plan waived the signed consent requirement due to lack of parental literacy. Assent was then obtained verbally from the students as well.

The team also conducted 21 hour-long interviews with school staff at the end of the first year of the study and at the start of the second year. These interviews were conducted with four ESL teachers, nine mainstream teachers, two specialist teachers (gym and art), and six other staff (administrators, a security guard, a teacher's aide, and the school nurse). Staffers were asked to describe their experiences with refugee children and Somali Bantu in particular, to examine the challenges they encountered and the strategies they used in response.

### B. *The School*

The Chicago neighborhood where the study took place is one of the most ethnically diverse in the United States.<sup>21</sup> The neighborhood is a “gateway community” where newly arriving immigrants—including refugees—settle. A refugee resettlement agency and several ethnic organizations provide services to newly arriving families, including English language training, job placement, and after-school and summer activities. The study site, a kindergarten to sixth grade school, reflected the composition of the surrounding community: the 1,200-plus student population was predominantly Hispanic (73 percent), with smaller Asian (13 percent), white (9 percent), and Black (6 percent) populations. Almost all of the students qualified for subsidized school lunches (96 percent), and 40 percent were designated as Limited English Proficient (LEP)—the Chicago school district’s term for ELL students.

Many of the school personnel spoke Spanish, and some adults in the school also spoke Vietnamese, Arabic, Assyrian, Serbo-Croatian, and Russian. There was little staff turnover. On average, the 21 staff members interviewed had worked at the school for 17 years (ranging from three to 40 years), and had witnessed multiple waves of refugees, including from Bosnia, Cambodia, Somalia, and Vietnam.

Consistent with district policy, newly arrived students were placed in grades according to age, regardless of past schooling experience. Each child was assigned to a mainstream grade-level classroom, and pulled out for two periods a day for ESL classes.

The school created special ESL classrooms taught by an Arabic-speaking teacher. No teachers or aides speaking Somali or Maay—the two predominant languages among the Bantu—were available. In the first year of the study, Somali refugee students were placed in two classrooms (sorted by age), and in the second year they were integrated with other ESL speakers in larger, multiple-age classrooms.

20 At the time of their enrollment, three were in kindergarten, four were in first grade, three were in second grade, three were in third grade, three were in fourth grade, two were in fifth grade, and one was in the sixth grade.

21 Lauren Fischer and Joseph P. Schwieterman, *A Kaleidoscope of Culture: Measuring the Diversity of Chicago’s Neighborhoods* (Chicago: DePaul University, Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development, 2008), <https://las.depaul.edu/centers-and-institutes/chaddick-institute-for-metropolitan-development/Documents/Chaddick%20Diversity%20Study%202008.pdf>.



### C. Data Analysis

The authors coded the field notes from the first and second years of the study to identify important themes in the experiences of teachers and students. The authors were able to track longitudinal changes across the study by comparing patterns and themes across these field notes and then analyzing them alongside interviews with school personnel.

### D. Theoretical Framework and Key Concepts

The study utilized an ecological approach as its theoretical framework. From an ecological viewpoint, human behavior cannot be understood without comprehending the surrounding context.<sup>22</sup> The ecological perspective tries to understand behavior (whether adaptive or resistant) as a reaction to the “environmental press” of family and community settings<sup>23</sup>—i.e., the kinds of behaviors that settings support, encourage, reward, and punish. In school settings, teachers face pressure resulting from national policies that put a premium on student test scores, and schools develop norms and attitudes with respect to educating ELL students.<sup>24</sup> For refugee students adapting to a new culture an important aspect of their context is the “acculturative press,”<sup>25</sup> or pressure by the school to acculturate in particular ways. For example, if students are expected to adopt the new language and culture while shedding their heritage culture, this approach could be described as an “assimilationist press;” whereas if schools encourage expression of students’ heritage culture as they learn the host culture, this could be described as a “multicultural press.”

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## *Interactions between refugee students and U.S. teachers require intercultural communication.*

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This study was also informed by a cultural-historical approach to human development, whereby students and teachers participate in cultural practices, drawing on their “linguistic and cultural-historical repertoires,” i.e., their cultural backgrounds and experiences.<sup>26</sup> Rogoff provides a useful framework that contrasts the “factory model” of U.S. schooling—which requires students to memorize and categorize objects and concepts without any context—against the “intent participation” model in agrarian preliterate societies, where children apprentice with adults to learn how to master tasks like cooking and farming.<sup>27</sup> For LFE refugee students, a factory approach is likely to be difficult to master because their learning experience is separated from meaningful community activities. Transitioning into a formal school setting can be very challenging for children who have only been exposed to learning through intent participation.

These contextual and cultural frameworks suggest that interactions between refugee students and U.S. teachers require intercultural communication, and that without such communication, differences between cultures can lead to misunderstandings and conflict.

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22 Edison J. Trickett, “A Future for Community Psychology: The Contexts of Diversity and the Diversity of Contexts,” in *A Quarter Century of Community Psychology: Readings from the American Journal of Community Psychology*, eds. Tracey A. Revenson, Anthony R. D’Augelli, Sabine E. French, Diane L. Hughes, David Livert, Edward Seidman, Marybeth Shinn, and Hirokazu Yoshikawa (New York: Springer, 2002), 513-34.

23 Henry A. Murray, *Explorations in Personality: A Clinical and Experimental Study of Fifty Men of College Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938).

24 Edison J. Trickett and Dina Birman, “Taking Ecology Seriously: A Community Development Approach to Individually Based Preventive Interventions in Schools,” in *Primary Prevention and Promotion in the Schools*, eds. Lynne A. Bond and Bruce E. Compas (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 361-90.

25 Dina Birman, Edison Trickett, and Rebecca M. Buchanan, “A Tale of Two Cities: Replication of a Study on the Acculturation and Adaptation of Immigrant Adolescents from the Former Soviet Union in a Different Community Context,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 35, no. 1-2 (2005): 83-101.

26 Barbara Rogoff, *The Cultural Nature of Human Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

27 Barbara Rogoff, Ruth Paradise, Rebeca Mejía-Arauz, Maricela Correa-Chavez, and Cathy Angelillo, “Firsthand Learning through Intent Participation,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 54 (2003): 175-203.



## E. Study Limitations

The findings of this study are necessarily limited, as they rely extensively on the researchers' own observations and teacher reports. For example, the study did not consider how cultural learning styles or the presence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may have influenced students' adaptation to school. Similarly, the study did not explore how particular individual attributes may have contributed to certain children being more behaviorally disengaged than others.

The study's findings are also limited to a particular small group of Somali Bantu students at a particular school, and are not necessarily generalizable to other refugee or LFE students attending different school settings. At the same time, the use of multiple observers and methods during this two-year longitudinal study allows for reasonable confidence in the findings for this particular group at this specific school.

## IV. Findings: The Students

In the fall of 2004, when the study began, there were 20 Somali Bantu children at the school. An additional seven children arrived and enrolled during the first and second years of the study, while six Bantu children moved away to other U.S. locations. Most of the children had not been to any kind of school. When asked if their children attended school in the camps, a parent, seemingly baffled by the question, replied, "Why should we send them to camp school when we knew we were going to America?"

Two main themes emerged with respect to the students. First, a number of the students engaged in behaviors that were seen as problematic by the school, and second, these behaviors seemed associated with their engagement or disengagement in the learning process, which in turn reflected their academic mastery and performance in the classroom.

### A. Behavioral Incidents

"Behavioral incidents" involved situations in which a child's behavior presented a problem for school staff. In each case, a refugee student either did something or refused to do something, requiring a teacher or another adult to intervene. Behavioral incidents created a problem for staff either because they distracted the staff from attending to regular classroom activities or because they posed a safety concern.

Because of the large number of field notes available for analyses (n=203), the authors quantified some of the data to assess trends over the two study years. In year one, there were on average 1.6 behavioral incidents per observation period (the length of two class periods). In year two, the rate of behavioral incidents declined, representing an average of 0.9, or less than one incident per observation period. Notably, behavioral incidents tended to have three main triggers: pencils, clothing, and food.

Pencils were involved 15 times in behavioral incidents in year one (11 percent of incidents), 11 times in year two (10 percent), and were mentioned 13 times by school staff in interviews. A symbol of schooling and literacy,<sup>28</sup> pencils played a central role in classroom learning activities. Newly arrived children did not know how to use pencils, and they tended to put too much pressure on them, causing the tips to break and requiring continual sharpening. Getting up to sharpen pencils became a constant distraction in classrooms. Children became distressed and cried or complained as their pencils and erasers shrank through sharpening and use. They forgot to bring their pencils to class, and when teachers gave them out, refugee children fought to have as many as possible. Children would throw pencils up in the air, at a peer, or on the floor, either in protest or to get a reaction from others.

Clothing was associated with behavioral incidents in field notes six times in year one (7 percent of inci-

28 John Duffy, "Never Hold a Pencil: Rhetoric and Relations in the Concept of 'Preliteracy,'" *Written Communication* 17, no. 2 (2009): 224-57.



dents), four times in year two (3 percent), and noted 14 times in staff interviews. School personnel were extremely concerned that children dress appropriately for cold weather (wearing socks, hats, gloves, and coats). They also wanted them to dress appropriately for school and gym class and to comply with the school's policy that head coverings (other than the hijab for girls) not be worn inside. One boy was distraught when he was asked to remove the hat he was proudly wearing in the classroom. The school had given him the hat the day before, to wear in the cold weather. Another student came to school the day after Halloween wearing a costume, and the staff felt that this was inappropriate and searched for a change of clothes.

Food and eating were associated with behavioral incidents in field notes seven times in year one (8 percent of incidents), four times in year two (3 percent), and noted ten times in interviews. These incidents involved hoarding food, refusing to eat food in the cafeteria or at classroom parties, or not knowing how to eat unfamiliar foods such as hot dogs or tacos. During Ramadan, as students observed a strict fast (and no swallowing), they were found to be spitting throughout the day.

All incidents were classified into six categories: "disruptive behaviors," "academic refusals," "academic complaining," "child distressed," "not being in right place," and "hoarding" (see Appendix Table A-1). These categories often overlapped. For example, if a child cried while refusing to engage in an academic activity, this was also coded as child distress, as well as a minor disruptive behavior if it distracted the class. These categories were also confirmed in interviews with school personnel.

## 1. Disruptive Behaviors

The largest category of behavioral incidents observed in both years was disruptive behaviors (72 percent in year one and 88 percent in year 2; see Table A-1). Disruptive behaviors most often involved refugee children interrupting the flow of classroom activities by getting out of their seats, talking to each other, or fidgeting. As one school administrator described:

*Imagine here is a small group sitting together and working. They will get up and walk away, or start talking loudly to each other; they ignore what's going on, as if the teacher is not there. One of them might get up and walk around. We showed them how to ask permission and go to the bathroom. Now some of them want to go all the time.*

Incidents that disrupted teachers and staff from their routine activities often involved violations of school norms or rules, such as a child not raising her hand before speaking in class, or not having a winter coat to wear outside during a fire drill. On occasion disruptive behaviors involved physically aggressive acts such as children kicking, biting, or fighting with other students, or throwing objects at someone, such as a pencil or even a chair.

## 2. Academic Refusals and Academic Complaining

In year one, academic refusals represented the second-largest category (28 percent) of behavioral incidents identified. Students would sit slumped over their desks or with their arms folded and refuse to do the assignment, saying, "I don't want to do this," or push books off their desk. Sometimes children would walk away from their desk, or just walk out of the classroom. At times teachers were able to convince the child to continue working, but constantly attending to these refusals made it difficult to maintain order, and children often slipped into further disruptive activities.

By year two, academic refusals occurred infrequently, coded for only 7 percent of the behavioral incidents. However, in year two a new behavior—"academic complaining"—emerged in 11 percent of incidents. Rather than flatly refusing to do work, children would noisily open their books and say, "I'm too tired" or complain that they did not have proper supplies—although after some prodding by adults they would proceed to do the work.



### 3. Child Distress

The third-most frequent category of behavioral incidents observed in year one involved children in distress, most often demonstrated by uncontrollable crying (22 percent). This then was also coded 18 times in staff interviews. Child distress was particularly true when children were new to the school, separated from siblings, or brought to a new and unfamiliar classroom. One teacher explained, “I remember when [child’s name] first came to me. She threw herself on the floor, like a two-year-old having a tantrum who would never, ever see their parents again.” These outbursts were so powerful that teachers were unsure what to do to comfort the children. Child distress was not observed at all in year two, even when new arriving Somali Bantu students entered the school.

### 4. Not Being in the Right Place

A number of behavioral incidents involved the child not being in the right place at the expected time. On several occasions, Somali Bantu children hid under desks during a fire alarm, refusing to follow the class outside. Newly arrived children in particular did not come to class on time, either because they did not understand the schedule, or because they were walking younger siblings to their classrooms. In one case during the first year, a child was inadvertently left behind in a classroom as the students lined up and left. The child was found crying in the darkened room alone, not knowing how to open the unlocked door.

On occasion, refugee children would walk or run out of their classroom, leaving the teacher unsure what to do. Teachers would ultimately call security guards to find and return the children to the classroom. Because one child did this frequently, he was made to wear a sign with his name, school, and classroom information. Initially, some teachers refused to take Somali Bantu students on field trips, fearing that they would run away from the class.

In several cases children refused to leave their classroom at the end of the class period. As one teacher explains, “At the end of the school day he would just sit over by my desk on the floor and cry and cry and cry, hold on to the desks here because he . . . didn’t want to leave.” In these situations, a teacher might stay with the children a few minutes, cajole them to leave, take them to the main office, or call a security guard to help.

### 5. Hoarding

Hoarding or stealing were observed eight times in year one and twice in year two (see Table A-1). This behavior included taking large amounts of food when distributed at parties, sneaking extra food in the cafeteria, and fighting over pencils or other supplies, as explained by this teacher:

*One thing he didn’t understand was that when he was playing with things . . . I felt like he would hoard things that he would want. . . . He would want to keep crayons and keep school supplies. He would a lot of times sneak foods out of the lunchroom and . . . come back to the classroom with 15 cookies in his pockets. With toys and stuff, he would keep things in his backpack.*

## B. Engagement and Disengagement in Learning

The second theme emerging from the fieldwork involved refugee students’ engagement or disengagement in the learning process, and related classroom behaviors. Students were categorized as engaged when they appeared to understand the academic task at hand; were able to communicate about it with a peer, fieldworker, or teacher; and demonstrated mastery of the activity by accomplishing the task and moving on to more complex or different tasks. In these instances children seemed to be enjoying themselves, wanted to keep going with the task, and were smiling, laughing, joking, or humming to themselves while working.

By contrast, the code “disengagement” was used when children seemed not to understand the task—when they went about it mechanically, repeated after the teacher, or copied something from the board



without appearing to understand the material. At times, children appeared to be confused by the material being presented to them, had difficulty grasping concepts, or appeared frustrated or bored. A particularly poignant example of disengagement involved standardized testing. Children were asked to fill in bubbles on answer sheets even when they didn't understand the questions or the meaning of the task, as illustrated in this field note:

*When the test started, I reminded him to fill in the bubble onto the separate answer sheet. My high hopes for him went down when he gave me this sad and confused look when he pointed at the problem for question number one and then pointed to the answer sheet. He saw a number "four" in the problem, looked up at me, then looked back down to his answer sheet and filled out a random bubble on the row for question number four, not question one. Then he looked up at me again.*

These tests required knowledge that was inaccessible to the children, such as reading passages of text when many were still learning to sound out words. They were confused by not being allowed to ask adults for help during testing, and distressed that they were not able to master the task.

Disengagement in learning was often accompanied by behavioral incidents, as students who were frustrated or bored because they could not master the academic material became restless, fidgety, and disruptive in class.

## V. Findings: The Teachers

In interviews, teachers expressed interest in and concern for their Somali Bantu students, and reported a number of challenges they faced when teaching them. This section maps out these challenges, along with teacher attitudes toward these students' acculturation and adaptation, and teachers' strategies to overcome these challenges.

### A. Challenges Presented by the Bantu Students

Teachers talked extensively about how challenging it was to work with the Somali Bantu, seeing them as "completely different" from other immigrant groups. As one teacher said, "the Somalian children are more primitive than any other group of students I have ever instructed." Though race was never mentioned, teachers seemed to contrast this group of Black African students with the Hmong, another refugee group that arrived with low literacy levels. In the words of one teacher, "As I remember, those kids were really, really quiet and well behaved, did really well in school." In contrast, views of Somali Bantu reflected concerns about both academic and behavioral issues: "This is the only group that's come that doesn't even know how to write their name . . . these kids are so far behind; they are noisy, moving around constantly."

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*Teachers talked extensively about how challenging it was to work with the Somali Bantu.*

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Teachers expressed concerns that having Somali Bantu students in their classrooms made their work more difficult because of pressures to produce good test scores in light of policies like NCLB. One teacher said,

*... And the thing is it always comes down to the teacher's accountability.... if there's pressure to be at a certain level by a certain time... It's a lot of stress... if your scores are going to be looked at then*



*who wants a kid who's not likely to do well the first couple years that they're here?*

Having Somali Bantu children in the classroom was seen as a problematic not only because it was difficult to educate them, but also because doing so took instruction time away from the other students, lowering the overall performance of the class and potentially affecting the school's performance on NCLB-mandated metrics. As a school administrator explained:

*Teachers are very frustrated . . . it's hard for them to have this child among all the others they are teaching. They don't stay in their seat, they don't understand what's going on, you need to give them something to do, but what? Teachers were very overwhelmed this year; I was overwhelmed too. They are trying to serve other students too . . . they need to worry about reading scores. Reading scores at the school went down this year; we don't know why, some people say the test was harder, but we don't know.*

Beyond their fears that Somali Bantu students would lower their school's performance, teachers and staff described difficulties arising from limited resources. Class sizes in many mainstream classrooms exceeded 30 students, and teachers complained of difficulties finding materials appropriate for LFE students while carrying out the lesson plan for the larger class. Despite limited resources, school staff described numerous creative solutions to accommodate the refugee children, such as finding special materials or activities—and even providing these at their own expense. On school spirit day, when all the other children came to school wearing matching school T-shirts, the refugee students looked dejected in class; so a teacher bought all of them T-shirts, and the children wore them proudly for many days. Teachers routinely purchased pencils, crayons, markers, and socks for the refugee children.

## **B. Teacher Attitudes**

Teacher attitudes emerged as an important theme in the study. Teachers expressed strong opinions about whether and how the Somali students should acculturate to the United States, opinions that could be classified as “assimilationist” or “multicultural.” Some teachers expressed both sets of attitudes at different times. Teachers and staff with a primarily assimilationist stance felt strongly that the refugee students should learn American cultural norms; learn and use English; understand, respect, and follow school rules; and give up their cultural practices in the process. They also felt that the school should not make special accommodations for these students. As one teacher explained:

*I see myself as not a regular classroom teacher of reading and math and social sciences but as a teacher of English to bilingual children—and I use language arts, math, and social studies to teach language. I have eight different ethnic groups in this room right now and I mean there is no point in my learning one language to single out one ethnic group. That's not my goal. My goal is to teach everybody English so that they can learn to go out and succeed in the world.*

Staff members with an assimilationist attitude strongly insisted that the children learn and accept school rules and norms. School norms included raising one's hand in class before speaking, lining up with the class at the beginning of the day and at lunch, asking for permission to go to the bathroom, dressing appropriately for school and for the weather, and using a tissue to blow one's nose. Of particular concern were rules that involved health and safety, seen as a necessary “bottom line” that children needed to observe in order for everyone to be safe in the school building.

Some teachers and other staff were more flexible, advocating for the importance of learning about the refugees' culture before insisting on enforcing all school rules and norms. Invoking a multicultural viewpoint, these staff members talked about the importance of negotiating with the child and the family, respecting their religion and culture, and discussing problems to arrive at a mutual accommodation. For example, the gym teacher had a meeting with the parents of Somali Bantu girls. With the help of an interpreter, he explained that he respected their religion and requirements to dress in particular ways, but he asked that the girls slightly alter what they wore so they would be able to participate in physical activities.



As a result, the girls started wearing sneakers and looser skirts with pants underneath, which enabled them to participate in gym class. During Ramadan the school made provisions for the children, taking them to the auditorium during lunch, and giving them paper cups so they could continue spitting. One teacher referred to these accommodations as “not a big deal,” seeing them as an important way to make the students feel welcome.

Some teachers were willing to bend or ignore the rules when they felt that refugee children needed time to adjust to the culture and the school’s policies. Some teachers overlooked whether or not the children raised their hands in the classroom and did not ask them to do homework. Others felt that the children occasionally needed some unstructured time, and they allowed a child to stay in their classroom rather than go on to the next activity; or they sent a child who misbehaved for extra tutoring rather than to the vice principal’s office to be disciplined. However, one staff member expressed some ambivalence about this approach, feeling that while it may be important to give refugee children time to adjust, ultimately they had to assimilate to the school rules:

*I get very frustrated . . . with certain issues, and I feel myself getting very tense sometimes because . . . it’s just like, they should really have this by now. And I don’t understand why, you know? So there is a certain amount of frustration because I think we all lack the skills with this particular group. . . It’s constant work dealing with them . . . for the most part [now] they’re a little bit more accepting. I would say that 95 percent of them are at a point where they can start to accept what we’re saying that this is how it needs to be, you know, this is the culture of school and this is how you need to behave.*

Whether or not teachers were actively interested in making accommodations, working with Somali Bantu children required them to adjust their daily routines. While some teachers were proactive, creative, and open to designing specialized accommodations, others did so in reaction to behaviors they saw as unacceptable, as a way to restore control of their classroom.

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*The most frequently observed techniques sought to build the confidence of Somali Bantu students and make them feel connected to the teacher and the class.*

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### **C. Strategies for Teaching Bantu Students**

The study identified three strategies that teachers used to overcome the challenges of working with the refugee children. These were: building relationships and providing affirmation, giving students one-on-one attention, and sharing meaningful materials (see Table A-2).

#### **I. Building Relationships and Providing Affirmation**

The most frequently observed techniques sought to build the confidence of Somali Bantu students and make them feel connected to the teacher and the class. For example, a teacher might talk to a child about his life or use humor to put him at ease while engaging in a learning activity. Teachers and fieldworkers reported that children enjoyed being called on to answer questions. Students were engaged in learning when asked to help distribute textbooks, translate for a newly arrived student, or help a classmate with a task they had already mastered.

Teachers sought to build children’s self-confidence by offering praise, among other things. Children beamed when praised by adults, and coveted rewards such as stickers and candy. One teacher made sure that when a refugee student completed a difficult task, the entire class applauded. Using a dry erase board gave children the opportunity to practice and reduced performance anxiety, as explained by one teacher:





*One other thing I'm recalling about [child's name] [is] that whenever I would give them some kind of assignment to draw something, he was very quick to say, "I can't do this." I don't remember if he said it in words at this point or if he was just letting me know 'I can't.' And then I started to always let him use a chalkboard first . . . he seemed a lot more comfortable with something that wouldn't [be] permanent . . . [that] he could keep trying and trying.*

One child made a particularly strong connection with a first-grade teacher, who then made special effort to make him comfortable. During vacations, she gave him a calendar to mark off days until she returned. The teacher also made sure that the next year he would be placed in a classroom next door to hers so that she could check in on him.

## 2. One-on-One Attention

A particularly effective strategy involved giving a child one-on-one attention. The children seemed to covet such attention, and complained when an adult was helping another child. By contrast, when an adult worked with several children at different ability levels, some children became bored if they finished ahead of the others or frustrated when they could not keep up with someone else. This group work often resulted in behavioral incidents as children started to fidget, complain, or refused to work.

A one-on-one strategy allowed the adult to focus on the child, identify the appropriate pace at which the child could master the task, discern the stumbling blocks, and present information accessibly, as illustrated in the following field note:

*We went over a few pages of vocabulary until the lesson of pronouns came about. So I attempted to help him understand how to ask and respond accordingly. For example, he saw a picture of a boy and a girl pointing at each other with a speech bubble saying, 'My name is John. You are Mimi,' etc. I noticed that it was hard for him to grasp [the] concept of 'him, her, my, mine, you and yours.' So instead I asked him, "What is your name?" He said "[child's name]." I tried to make him say, "I am [child's name]," and after some attempts, he got it. So I pointed to myself and said, "I am Miss Debbie. You are [child's name]." Then I asked him who was I and he pointed to himself saying, 'I am [child's name].' Finding this amusing, I could not help think how on earth I could have ever understood this concept when I was a child. So I tried another technique. Instead of asking questions, I moved his wrist to point to himself and made him repeat, "I am [child's name]." And then moved his finger to point back at me and I made him repeat, "You are Miss Debbie."*

By working with the child individually, the fieldworker was able to understand that the child found the concept of pronouns too difficult even with pictures and speech bubbles. Instead, she used pointing and broke down the task into smaller steps. Instead of proceeding to "my" and "your," she first helped the child understand "I am," and "you are."

## 3. Meaningful Materials

Another way to facilitate children's learning involved using aids and materials that infused learning tasks with meaning and that were fun for the children. Students seemed to enjoy practicing counting when using a box of crayons, and spelling when using an electronic phonics game or playing bingo or tic-tac-toe. Using picture books of African landscapes, animals, and villages to teach vocabulary and spelling engaged the children in conversations about their lives prior to migration—while keeping their attention on the lesson. Often, teachers got materials for older students from kindergarten or first-grade classrooms in order to find ways to teach the basics, and also to structure learning tasks to accommodate the refugee children's relatively short attention spans.

The greatest barrier to engagement identified in the field notes were materials that presented information in a way that made it difficult for children to figure out the meaning or purpose of what they were doing. For example, many assignments involved learning phonics through meaningless phrases such as "the cat is on the bat" or "the bat is in the pan." Children could not make sense of the pictures that accom-



panied these texts (e.g., What is a bat, and why is it on a frying pan?).

These materials assumed cultural knowledge that the children did not have, such as the meaning of words like “bat” and “igloo.” On one occasion, children were confused by a book with pictures of furry animals, unsure why the teacher said “nice bunny” about a rabbit, but “pew, stinks, no good” about a skunk—another small, furry animal. Another time, children were given a worksheet with male and female faces of different ages, and asked to circle whether the picture was of a sister, brother, mother, father, grandmother, or grandfather. The children were confused; they looked at each other and checked the reactions of the adults while circling “mother” for multiple pictures of younger and older women. In trying to help a child relate the exercise to his own life, the fieldworker learned that the boy had three mothers. Coming from a polygamous family structure, the children were confused by a task that assumed monogamy.

## VI. Discussion and Conclusions

This study sought to understand the experiences of newly arriving Somali Bantu refugee students and their teachers in a U.S. elementary school. The results offer a detailed portrait of the experiences of LFE refugee students, suggesting they face extreme difficulties adjusting to school—challenges that are not accounted for in prior theory and research on the adjustment of immigrant students. Despite these tremendous difficulties, however, Somali Bantu children were able to engage in learning activities and to make academic progress over the course of two years, with their teachers’ help. This study documents the challenges facing students and teachers, and the strategies teachers have utilized—with varying degrees of success, in a context of limited resources—to try and accommodate students’ particular needs.

### A. Implications for Refugees’ Academic Engagement

The study suggests that LFE refugee students represent an “extreme” case relative to the literature on academic engagement of immigrant students.<sup>29</sup> Academic engagement or disengagement has three overlapping and interrelated aspects: cognitive, behavioral, and relational.<sup>30</sup> Cognitive disengagement—when students do not understand or do not master class material—can lead to boredom, difficulty concentrating, and a lack of self-confidence. These in turn can result in a decline in class participation and attendance, or behavioral disengagement. Declining class participation and attendance can lead teachers to view the students negatively, assuming they are uninterested in learning or that they lack the necessary skills to succeed, leading to relational disengagement. Students who are less behaviorally and relationally engaged have fewer opportunities to interact with the teacher and learn the material, leading in turn to greater cognitive disengagement.

While consistent with prior research on behavioral disengagement among immigrant students,<sup>31</sup> the behavioral incidents described in this study were not the result of disengagement, defined as a lack of interest in or commitment to school. Rather these incidents occurred when students did not understand the rules of behavior, or when they were unwilling to abide by the rules, given their other demands (e.g., attending to their younger siblings instead of coming to their own class on time). A third explanation for some of these behaviors (e.g., hoarding) was that they were the legacy of previous traumatic experiences.

Cognitive disengagement as it emerged in this study is similar to the concept described by Suarez-Orozco et al.<sup>32</sup> The students in this study, however, were not disengaged from learning in the sense of being uninterested in it; in fact, they showed great eagerness to engage in learning activities with adults. Rather, they

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29 Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994).

30 Carola Suárez-Orozco, Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, and Irina Todorova, *Learning a New Land: Immigrant Students in American Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.



struggled to connect with the learning materials, and they lacked even the most basic skills required for schooling, such as the ability to handle classroom materials, color in workbooks, and add and spell—all of which made it difficult for them to participate in learning activities. This lack of basic skills required teachers to go to extreme lengths to come up with creative solutions.

Relational engagement can help increase the behavioral engagement of immigrant students.<sup>33</sup> For example, when teachers in this study built relationships with students and focused on them individually, students were more engaged. These techniques seemed to contextualize learning, make students comfortable, and prevent negative emotions (such as fear of making mistakes or being embarrassed of one's English<sup>34</sup>) from interfering with learning. In addition, one-on-one attention from adults was important not only as a means of providing emotional/relational support, but also because it enabled the teachers to assess the child's level of mastery and adjust school tasks accordingly.

These findings are also consistent with Rogoff's cultural-historical framework, as applied to the gulf that exists between children who have not been exposed to formal schooling and U.S. schools' expectations of them. The research team observed the disparity between the rule-bound "factory model" of teaching and the expectations of refugee students, who had previously been socialized through purposeful activities carried out alongside adults. The school's insistence on strict rules regarding subjects such as dress and the age segregation of students was at times impractical. Standard teaching materials and tests often were inappropriate for this group when, for example, students were presented with materials out of context or asked to fill in computerized answer sheets without understanding the test questions. Such rigid approaches to teaching and assessment are likely to have been exacerbated by pressures from NCLB to produce improvement in test scores.

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*Relational engagement can help increase the behavioral engagement of immigrant students.*

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The findings presented in this report suggest that Somali Bantu children with no English language facility or literacy skills were able to engage in learning to some degree during their first years in a U.S. school. The report's findings suggest that if schools are willing to employ the strategies for accommodating LFE refugee students described here, these students can be successful learners. School staff varied though as to whether they felt the school should take steps to accommodate the Bantu children, reflecting larger societal debates about how much schools and other public institutions should adjust to increasingly diverse service populations.

## **B. The Politics of Accommodation**

Debates on immigration, bilingual education, and English-only policies in the larger U.S. society are played out in the nation's schools. Some believe that accommodating immigrants absorbs scarce resources as urban schools struggle to meet accountability standards and the needs of U.S.-born students. An alternative view sees diverse immigrant cultures as contributing to the society. The arrival of LFE refugee children intensifies this debate, since these children require even greater accommodations from schools. While other countries, such as Australia and Israel, place newly arrived students in special year-long newcomer programs, the United States has essentially adopted a "sink-or-swim" approach, placing these students directly into mainstream classrooms with limited ESL support. And the teachers in U.S. classrooms are being asked to meet the needs of a wide range of students often without additional support or tailored curricula.

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33 Carola Suárez-Orozco, Allyson Pimentel, and Margary Martin, "The Significance of Relationships: Academic Engagement and Achievement among Newcomer Immigrant Youth," *Teachers College Record* 111, no. 3 (2009): 712–49.

34 Stephen D. Krashen, *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1982).



The findings in this report affirm the importance of understanding the “acculturative press,” or the types of pressures exerted on immigrant students about how they should adapt to school.<sup>35</sup> The findings also suggest that teachers who value multiculturalism over assimilation tend to have a broader range of educational options available to them when working with LFE refugee students. For example, learning about a child’s culture and incorporating that knowledge into lesson plans facilitates academic engagement, contextualizes learning, and makes academic tasks more accessible. Similarly, school staff who value multiculturalism also appear more willing to bend the rules to accommodate refugee children, for example by allowing them to wear different clothes to gym class or spit into cups during Ramadan. Incorporating refugee children’s culture into instruction and accommodating their social needs through flexible school rules can help students overcome the assimilationist press, which can stifle their school engagement and academic success.

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*These findings suggest that it may be prudent for schools to adapt to the needs of their newly arrived refugee and immigrant students.*

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These findings suggest that it may be prudent for schools to adapt to the needs of their newly arrived refugee and immigrant students. The large number and range of behavioral incidents in the school being studied forced staff to address them. Allowing siblings to stay together for the first week or two could have eliminated or reduced crying spells and incidents of children running out of the classroom, while communicating an attitude of care to the students and their families. Making special arrangements during fire drills, or relaxing strict rules about covering one’s head indoors may have reduced the children’s anxiety and cut down on problematic behaviors. By making even small accommodations, the school could have helped the students adjust and reduced the stress on school staff. Instead, insistence on having the newcomers learn and abide by school rules led to avoidable problems and conflicts.

Some incidents were perhaps unavoidable: only the passage of time could reduce hoarding behaviors or increase English language skills. Some accommodations were so resource intensive that they would be nearly impossible to sustain, such as providing ongoing one-on-one attention to each refugee child. These considerations point to the potential advantages of a newcomer school that would specifically focus on the needs of these students.<sup>36</sup>

This report’s findings about the challenges of educating LFE refugee children correspond with—and deepen—the existing literature on immigrant academic engagement in school.<sup>37</sup> In particular, the findings illustrate the different causes of behavioral disengagement: while some students may be resistant to learning, others may not know how to learn in school in the first place. Finally, the findings point to acculturative pressures that can shape refugee students’ academic engagement and therefore have broad implications for their academic success, and that can serve as a useful framework for further research on school practices.

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35 Edison J. Trickett and Dina Birman, “Acculturation, School Context, and School Outcomes: Adaptation of Refugee Adolescents from the Former Soviet Union,” *Psychology in the Schools* 42, no. 1 (2005): 27–38.

36 Rebecca Constantino and Magaly Lavadenz, “Newcomer Schools: First Impressions,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 69, no. 1 (1993): 82–101.

37 Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova, *Learning a New Land*.



## Appendices

**Table A-1. Behavioral Incidents Recorded During the Study**

Types of Behavioral Incidents	Classroom Observations		Interviews with School Staff	Examples of Behavioral Incidents
	Year 1	Year 2		
Disruptive behaviors	97	92	50	Fidgeting, getting out of seat, talking to each other; includes physically aggressive acts
Academic refusals	38	7	6	Not doing work, pushing book off desk
Academic complaining	1	12	0	Complaining about doing work, saying too tired
Child distressed	30	0	18	Crying
Not being in the right place	12	3	3	Being late for class, walking or running out of the classroom
Hoarding or stealing	8	2	4	Food, pencils, toys
<b>Total Behavioral Incidents Coded</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>58</b>	

*Note:* More than one type of behavioral incident could be coded during one event. Behavioral incidents were coded either from field notes dating from Year 1 or Year 2, or from interviews with school staff at the end of Year 1 or start of Year 2.

**Table A-2. Teacher Strategies for Coping with Children**

Types of Strategies	Examples
Building relationships and providing affirmation	<p>Adult conveying personal attention by asking about the child's life, sharing personal information, using humor as part of task, asking child to help with a classroom task, or to work collaboratively with another student.</p> <p>Praising child for accomplishments including verbal praise, tangible rewards (candy, play time), having class applaud.</p>
One-on-one attention	Adult giving individualized attention to child, assessing child's level of understanding of task, modifying task according to child's level, encouraging child to keep going with task.
Meaningful materials	<p>Including picture books about concepts familiar to the children such as books about African animals.</p> <p>Contextualizing learning and making it fun by creating meaningful learning activities, such as when learning spelling or arithmetic through the use of games and manipulatives.</p>



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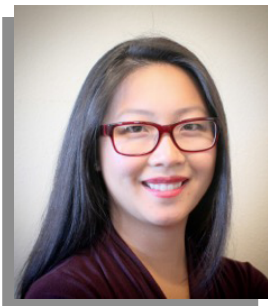
## About the Authors



**Dina Birman** is Associate Professor of Educational and Psychological Studies, and Director of the Ph.D. Program in Community Well-Being at the University of Miami, School of Education and Human Development. She has conducted research and written extensively about adaptation of adolescent, adult, and elderly refugees and immigrants, including those from the former Soviet Union, Central America, Somalia, and Vietnam. Based on studies conducted in Washington DC, Maryland, Chicago, and New Jersey, she has published on school and psychological adjustment of refugee adolescents, the role of parental involvement, differences in acculturation between adolescents and their parents, and effectiveness of community and school-based mental health interventions.

As a community psychologist, she explores these topics from an ecological perspective, studying the impact of characteristics of the schools and receiving communities. Dr. Birman is a Fellow of the Society of Community Research and Action (Division 27 of the American Psychological Association), and the International Academy for Intercultural Research. She has served on editorial boards of journals in the fields of cultural and community psychology and is currently Editor-in Chief of *the International Journal of Intercultural Relations*.

As a refugee from the former Soviet Union herself, Dr. Birman has always been interested in understanding the ways that culture shapes human behavior. She received her B.S. in Foreign Service from Georgetown University, and her Ph.D. in Clinical/Community Psychology from the University of Maryland, College Park, focusing on immigrant acculturation and adaptation. From 1991-1997 she worked as a program officer in the Refugee Mental Health Program at the National Institute of Mental Health and SAMHSA, providing consultation and technical assistance to the national refugee resettlement program administered by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. In this role she was involved in the resettlement of refugees. She built on the knowledge gained through this work to develop a research program on refugee and immigrant adaptation. After completing two postdoctoral fellowships, Dr. Birman was on the faculty in the Department of Psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago (2003–13).



**Nellie Tran** is Assistant Professor of Counseling and School Psychology at San Diego State University. Dr. Tran is a community psychologist interested in the day-to-day lived experiences of oppressed people of color within the educational system. Her work centers on the concept of subtle biases (i.e., microaggressions) within the educational experience for contexts (e.g., schools, classrooms) and teachers, administrators, students, and their families. As an Asian American woman from a Vietnamese refugee family, she holds firsthand experiences of marginalization and pushed assimilation within the mainstream public educational system. She works to ensure that the voices and experiences of marginalized student populations are understood and incorporated in today's understanding of education and academic performance.

Dr. Tran received her doctorate in Community Psychology from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She was also on the faculty in the Department of Psychology at the University of Massachusetts Lowell and held elected executive committee positions in the Society for Community Research and Action (APA Division 27) and the Asian American Psychological Association.





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