

ABSTRACT

THE SOMALI AND SECONDARY SCHOOL CHOICE

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The three most common learning environments for secondary ESL programs are bilingual instruction, mainstreaming, and sheltered, content-based instruction. This paper looks more closely at one sheltered, content-based instruction school where the majority of students served are Somali. Students, graduates, and parents of students in the school were interviewed to answer the question: What educational and social factors play into students' and parents' choice of a content-based, sheltered English program for high school students rather than a mainstream environment where ESL students are placed in classes along with the native-speaking population for some or all of the day? Interviewees chosen had some experience in the mainstream environment before transferring to the sheltered environment. The results of the study suggest that factors such as a comfortable classroom climate, ease and convenience, and the ability to maintain cultural and religious practices influence the choice of a content-based, sheltered school.

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by

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Across the country, the number of English as A Second Language (ESL) students steadily increased during the 1990's. During this period, the number of ESL students rose by 95% in K-12 schools nationwide while total enrollment increased by only 12%. In the Midwest, ESL enrollment has increased by over 100% in the last five years (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006). It is anticipated that language minority students will constitute 40% of the K-12 population in the United States by the 2030s (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

There is a widespread perception that the best environment for ESL instruction is one in which students have direct regular interaction with native English-speaking peers (Harklau, 1994). Researchers commonly feel that a totally English-speaking environment will force students to learn the language quickly. Many educators contend that ESL students can only learn to compete academically with peers through learning in the mainstream classroom (Clegg, 1996). In addition, it is felt that interaction with native English-speaking peers will allow students from other countries to learn American culture and will assure that they have the same access to all educational opportunities offered to other K-12 students. Goals 2000, a national educational objective, states that all students will be held to the same standards across the United States (Carrasquillo & Rodriguez, 2002). This is to ensure educational equality.

However, there is a growing trend toward specialized schools across the country.

A growing number of these schools offer a sheltered or separate environment for ESL students. According to Boyson and Short, in the late 1970's, there were only four middle and high school ESL programs for refugees and immigrants new to America. In 2003, a four-year study was compiled with information from 115 newcomer programs. Seventy-seven percent are programs within a school, 17% are programs with a separate site, and 6% are whole school programs. The length of time students remain in a sheltered environment varies with individual schools. Forty-three percent of students in newcomer programs stay for one year only, while 28% stay for more than one year (2003). My own environment is a whole school program where the majority of students stay for more than one year.

My School

From my observations, sheltered schools quickly fill with students. This is the case in my own teaching situation, a charter school in the Midwest. The school's mission is to assist older teens with multiple challenges so that they can achieve academic, career, and life success. The school has multiple building locations: several for "American-born" students, and one solely for immigrants and refugees. The latter offers ESL classes as well as bilingual instruction in math and science.

The learning environment is considered sheltered as the classes consist solely of immigrants and refugees, and the structured interaction with native English speakers is with teachers and classroom volunteers. Vocabulary, language structure, and reading are taught through leveled content area classes. English language proficiency levels range from beginning to advanced. Students' ages range from 15-21, and most students are

Somali; students from Ethiopia and Latin America make up the rest of the student population.

When students enroll, they are given placement tests in writing and reading. Based on their scores, they are placed in level-appropriate content area classes. The school has classes in levels ranging from one to five into which students are placed. The beginning students (Levels 1 and 2) remain with the same group throughout the entire day and receive six hours of instruction in the following classes: reading, grammar/writing, content science, conversation, math, and computer or an additional content reading class. Students in the upper levels receive instruction in classes such as literature, grammar and writing, biology, chemistry, physics, sociology, health, computer, geography, U.S. History, World History, algebra, geometry, and advanced math as well as classes that focus on preparing students for the standardized tests required for graduation.

Students' schedules are custom-made for a variety of circumstances unique to our population. Out of financial necessity, many students work full or part time, and some receive work-study credit through their places of employment. A few students have young children and limited daycare availability; thus, they can attend for only part of the day. Some students choose to attend our night school program in addition to attending the day school. This allows them to accumulate additional credits toward high school graduation and extra time to work on English language proficiency.

My Classroom Experience

One day, we had been talking about the word *discipline* in my Level 3 Grammar/Writing class, and the word *detention* had arisen. I asked, “Who knows what detention is?” (My school does not have detention.) To my surprise, a number of young men described with ease and accuracy what it meant to be *in detention*. Clearly each had had personal experience with detention in large area high schools: the East African students whose hands were raised had recently transferred to our school from mainstream environments. Some of them led my class academically. This moment strengthened my awareness of the different school experiences some of our students encounter. (One of them was eventually interviewed for this project.)

New students are accepted all the time at my school. In one week, we might have two students enroll per class. When a new student enters the classroom, there are several questions I often ask. “How long have you been in America? Did you study English before? Have you attended other schools in America? How did you hear about this school?” Beyond my desire to get to know them, I am intrigued by why they chose this school. What drew them to this place?

The responses I receive are as varied as my students. Some simply do not understand the questions. Other students have studied English in Kenya for a few months or years and are fluent socially. Some have moved from other states or cities in the Midwest, and other students have attended a number of high schools in the metropolitan area in which we are located.

However, by far, the most common response I receive to the question, “How did

you hear about this school?” is “My friend told me.” As an ESL instructor at *Dhahdin Charter, (a pseudonym), I’ve been fascinated by this response and am curious about why so many come here, despite the general public’s perception that there is so much more available for them (classroom interaction with native English-speaking peers, advanced classes, and extra-curricular activities) in mainstream schools.

The Research Question

To date, little research has focused on understanding why students and parents choose a small ESL school over a large mainstream school. It is important for mainstream teachers, ESL teachers, administrators, and researchers to investigate and understand students’ and parents’ school choices so that students can be better served in any school environment. This study attempts to begin to address this lack of research by looking into students’ needs and interests. What educational and social factors play into students’ and parents’ choice of a self-contained, content-based, sheltered English program for high school ESL students over a mainstream environment?

Chapter Two gives an overview of the history of ESL in this country and also examines three different instructional models for secondary school ESL: bilingual instruction, mainstreaming, and content-based, sheltered instruction. To provide a richer context for this research, particular attention is given to content-based, sheltered English instruction and the challenges and benefits ESL students face within such a model.

*The Somali translation for Dhahdin is “transition.”

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

There is little research which supports the question addressed in this capstone: What educational and social factors play into students' and parents' choice of a self-contained, content-based, sheltered English program for high school ESL students over a mainstream environment? This chapter will provide a brief history of ESL in the United States, give an overview of the three types of ESL students, and look carefully at three of the most commonly used models of ESL instruction for high schools in America: bilingual instruction, mainstreaming and content-based, sheltered ESL classes. It is essential to have some insight into ESL history, ESL students, and ESL models of instruction in order to attempt to answer the question posed. Positives and negatives of each model will be discussed as well as implications for student learning. Cultural differences and challenges specific to the largest group served in my school will also be addressed. A summary of the discussion will close the chapter, as well as a preview of the research direction taken to answer my question.

History of ESL Services in the U.S.

From its beginning, this country has been a land of immigrants and refugees. Historically, the children of newcomers to America have been bilingual as they learned English and maintained their parents' language; there were also many bilingual schools scattered throughout the country in the early 20th century, but no court cases regarding the

specifics of English services provided to immigrant children were brought in the United States until the mid 1970's.

In 1974, the United States Supreme Court addressed the issue of providing services to ESL students. The majority ruled that giving all students the same instruction and curriculum was not the same as fairly serving students who were learning English. In other words, teaching the same lessons to native and non-native English speakers does not provide adequate and appropriate services for the English language learner (*Lau versus Nichols*, 1974). *Lau versus Nichols* implies that schools must not only teach English to ESL students but must also provide access to the curriculum while students are learning English. No model of instruction was specified in the *Lau versus Nichols* case, so language teachers and researchers themselves have developed different models to teach ESL students.

Types of English Learners

Before looking at the different models, it is helpful to consider the academic backgrounds of the students being served in ESL programs in order to understand the students being served. According to Freeman and Freeman (2002), there are three general categories of ESL students in K-12 schools. The school at which I teach has all three categories of students in about equal numbers. The first is the student who is new to the country (fewer than five years) but who has had formal schooling in his/her first language. In addition to academic knowledge, these students have organizational and social knowledge about what it means to be a student. While they may soon be placed

with mainstream peers, they may score low for several years on standardized tests given in English.

A second type of ESL student is one who is also newly arrived (fewer than five years) but who has limited, interrupted, or no formal schooling in his/her first language. As a result, these students often are not literate in their native language. Such students must begin the literacy process from the beginning with the alphabet. Many of the older students in this category also need instruction in the organizational skills that children generally acquire in grade school. Some students in this category may include those who speak a different variety of English such as speakers of Liberian English.

Finally, there is the long-term English learner. This student has been in the country for seven or more years. Many times, he/she is not literate in the first language, and the student continues to struggle with organizational skills. He/she performs below grade level peers in reading and writing and tends to score low on standardized tests. Many students are in this group because their ESL or bilingual instruction has been inadequate or inconsistent. Students with learning disabilities may also eventually fall into this group.

The three types of ESL learners have had an impact on the development of different types of instructional models for ESL secondary students. The following section will look at the most common models of ESL instruction used in America today.

Models of ESL Programs

The three most common options for ESL instruction for high school students are bilingual instruction, mainstreaming, and content-based, sheltered ESL or some

combination thereof (Doherty, 2003). To provide background for this project, a closer look at each, including a definition of the model and its variations as well as advantages and disadvantages, follows.

Bilingual education is the oldest model and has been implemented in all 50 states since 1983 (Ovando & Collier, 1985). Prior to that, Florida was the first state to initiate “Spanish for Spanish speakers” classes in 1961 (Crawford, 1999; Ovando & Collier, 1985). Bilingual education is learning in two languages: the native language of the student and English, with the English level increasing until proficiency is reached. Generally, this model is seen as the optimal experience for an ESL student as the student becomes fluent both socially and academically in two languages. Skills learned in the first language, such as reading and problem solving, can be more easily transferred to the second language (Krashen, 1999; Rigg & Allen, 1989). After these skills are acquired in the native language, subject matter is taught in English in a way that is comprehensible to the student (Krashen, 1999).

There are two delivery models for bilingual education: one-way and dual. The one-way model is used when students who all speak the same primary language are instructed through their primary language and in English. School districts which have many students with the same first language tend to use this model (Thomas & Collier, 1999). The dual model is used most often when both native and nonnative speakers of English are in the same classroom. Teachers instruct in both English and the minority language with the two groups of students acting as peer tutors for each other (Thomas & Collier, 1997).

One advantage suggested by the research of Curiel, Rosenthal, and Richek (1986) is that bilingual education has a positive impact on retention and lowers the drop-out rates among high school students. Krashen (1999) supports the research above by adding that there is no evidence that bilingual education increases drop-out rates in students. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education (National Association for Bilingual Education, 2007, ¶2) released a study in 1991 that stated that the more schools educated children in their first language, the higher they scored academically in English. One disadvantage of this model is its impracticality when a school has children with a variety of first languages. It is nearly impossible financially and logistically to serve all students bilingually. In addition, finding qualified bilingual staff may be challenging (Mabbott, 2005).

A second model is called mainstreaming students. In the second model, students are placed in classes alongside the native-speaking population for some or all of the day. Many schools using this model mainstream students for a portion of the day. The students are also in ESL classes for part of the day. For example, one school system in the Midwest integrates students completely into mainstream classes within three years of entry into the country (J. Russell, personal communication, October 25, 2006). As a variant of this model, some schools choose to have mainstream and ESL teachers team-teach in the same classroom instead of placing students in separate ESL classes.

The rationale for placing ESL students in mainstream classes is based on several factors. The first is the belief that ESL students have the right to the same opportunities as their mainstream peers. This includes a right to the same curriculum, equality in

assessments, and maintenance of individual culture while learning and integrating fully into the school atmosphere and activities (Clegg, 1996). Second, it is possible that ESL students who interact with native-speaking English peers may acquire oral language faster. With native English-speaking peers, the instruction is also grade level equivalent which is most likely not the case in the ESL classroom. Clegg (1996) contends that ESL students can only learn to compete academically with peers by studying in the mainstream classroom.

A third argument for this model is that language acquisition takes time, and socially it is best if ESL students are with English-speaking peers soon after they arrive. Students who begin learning English between ages 12 and 15 generally require from six to eight years of study in order to reach academic achievement at grade-level norms in their second language (Collier, 1987). Hakuta, Butler, & Witt (2000) suggest that oral communicative proficiency takes three to five years to develop, and academic English proficiency can take from four to seven years. It seems, therefore, that the sooner an ESL student begins to be integrated into the mainstream arena, the better, for social as well as academic reasons.

In the variant within which team-teaching occurs, the ESL and mainstream teachers need time to coordinate lessons. Finding adequate time for teachers to coordinate curriculum is difficult for most schools. Another difficulty within the mainstream model is that the individual ESL teacher may not be able to adequately prepare the students for all the content areas they are mainstreamed into. Thus, students may be completely lost in some of their mainstream classes (Dufresne, 1993; Freeman &

Freeman, 1988; Mabbott, 2005). Students are then forced into a “sink or swim” mode of survival.

The third model, or content-based, sheltered ESL, can also be defined as a newcomer program. (The content-based, sheltered ESL model is the one which most closely resembles the model used at my school.) This is a program separate from the mainstream school, one that is focused on the specific language needs of ESL students who are new to the country (often less than a year). Most often, students are in newcomer programs for one to three years before being mainstreamed with peers. However, several programs operate as full four-year high schools (Boyson & Short, 2003). For many of the students at Dhahdin, the school is their only high school.

In such schools, most students are those with little or no English proficiency and limited or interrupted previous schooling (Boyson & Short, 2003; Dufresne & Hall, 1997; Mabbott, 2005). Instruction is focused on meeting students’ language and academic needs at a level appropriate for their English language skills. In contrast to the mainstreaming model, students are not scheduled in with mainstream peers to “sink or swim.”

During the 1999-2000 school year, 115 newcomer programs across the United States enrolled close to 15,000 middle and high school students who were recent immigrants and refugees. Rationales for the programs differ; however, some similar threads across programs include the following: 1) older students (14 and above) with no prior schooling require the more nurturing environment a newcomer program can provide where gaps in learning can be filled more quickly than in a mainstream high school, and

2) students who have little or no literacy skills can be better served in a sheltered program where translation services are more often accessible (Boyson & Short, 2003).

One disadvantage of the newcomer model is that students may have a hard time integrating into the mainstream after being isolated for so long. Additionally, the only English language models students have are their teachers; they do not have the advantage of interacting with mainstream peers (Mabbott, 2005). Thus, when students are moved into a mainstream classroom, the adjustment may be difficult socially and linguistically as they have been separated from English-speaking peers for some time.

In some schools based on the newcomer model, students remain in a sheltered environment until graduation. In such a school, content area classes such as social studies, math, science, and literature are designed for English language learners. Only ESL students are in the classroom; students are sheltered from and do not compete academically with mainstream peers (Freeman & Freeman, 1988).

According to Boyson and Short (2003), most newcomer centers are in urban settings where the majority of newcomers live in America. Programs vary on factors such as entrance requirements, length of day, length of enrollment, and exit criteria. Class sizes range from fewer than 10 to 35 students, and schedules are based on English proficiency level rather than grade level. The instructional design of newcomer schools usually incorporates many of the following: English language and literacy development, content area courses, some instruction in a student's native language, career orientation, study skills support, credit for high school courses, and student assessment.

A challenge inherent in the newcomer model is for teachers to keep expectations high in teaching content courses in English. Instructors also must be knowledgeable in both the content area they are teaching as well as in second language acquisition. Some teachers hold dual licenses in these two areas; others may teach with someone who is licensed in the area they are not (Mabbott, 2005).

In the Midwest metropolitan area where I am located, a sheltered instruction model first became a separate school in 1994. A study completed by a local public school district found that Hmong refugee students (the greatest number of ESL students in this area at that time) who began school after the age of 14 were generally below the 5th percentile in reading scores. Teachers, administrators, and community members began to become increasingly concerned about the numbers of students who were not graduating from high school or acquiring enough skills for a sustainable job (Dufresne & Hall, 1997). Studies in the district where the majority of Hmong were enrolled revealed that those who entered the American school system after fourth or fifth grade had a minimal chance of achievement in high school coursework (Dufresne, 1993).

Mainstream high school curriculum was simply too difficult for someone who was just beginning to learn English. Many refugees had little or no previous education before coming to America. In addition, there were extreme cultural differences. The refugee student had little in common with American-born peers. While little interaction with native English-speaking peers may seem to be a downfall in this model, research has shown that ESL students in a mainstream setting typically do not interact on their own with peers who speak English. Furthermore, ESL students have reported being

uncomfortable around native English-speaking peers because they are frequently laughed at for pronunciation or other mistakes (Pappamihiel, 2002; Wright, 2004). In addition, students reported that mainstream teachers often spoke too fast, presented too many directions, gave too few examples and called out correct answers with no reason for why these answers were correct. In addition, some students said they were very hesitant to raise their hands in a mainstream classroom to ask for clarification because the teacher “got mad” at them because everyone else (native English speakers) understood the concepts being taught (Curtin, 2005).

For high school immigrants and refugees, there are several additional points that must be addressed regarding a mainstreaming model versus a sheltered program model. The first is language. As stated earlier, at high school age, students need at least six to eight years to acquire academic proficiency. Students entering the country at age 15 may have a chance to graduate before they are 21. However, what happens to the students who enter high school at age 16 or above? State education funding for K-12 students is terminated the school year after the 21st birthday. Harklau (1994) states that research has shown there is a folk belief prevalent in ESL programs that students will learn English faster if they are seated in mainstream classes with native English speakers. However, content becomes progressively more difficult as a student progresses through high school, both because of the background knowledge needed and the reading level of the materials. It would be virtually impossible for a high school student to keep up with peers in a mainstream class even after a year of intensive English in a newcomer program.

Somali History

Roughly 70% of students at Dhahdin charter school are refugees from the east African country of Somalia; a refugee is someone who flees to a foreign country to escape danger or persecution. The students and parents interviewed in this study are all Somali. Because their history and culture play a role in their perception of our school, it is valuable to briefly look at Somalia and its history and culture.

In the nineteenth century, Somalia was divided into five different regions by British and Italian colonists. These regions united in 1960 to form the present day Somalia. In 1969, the Somali president was assassinated, and the new leader, Major General Mohammed Siyad Barre, became an ally of the Soviet Union which brought communism to Somalia. All business and trade was controlled under the Soviet model, and the Islamic way of life was challenged. The Soviet model weakened Somalia culturally and socially and eventually led the country to civil war. Complete disorder engulfed Somalia in the mid 1980's. At the same time the agencies in Somalia that assisted with humanitarian aid left, and most food and medicine delivered to the country was used by clan leaders to pay the militia (Farid & McMahan, 2004).

After dictator Siyad Barre was overthrown in 1991, civil war broke out in Somalia. People fled for their lives, and the educated were the first to have the resources and outside contacts to leave. As the war continued to escalate, so did the atrocities. Homes were looted, women and children were raped, and many were killed or left to die of starvation, dehydration, and disease (Farid & McMahan, 2004). Some describe the situation as one of the worst humanitarian crises faced by people in the world. By the

end of 1992, it was estimated that 500,000 people – 300,000 of them children – had died (Gardner & Bushra, 2004).

The only way out for many who survived the 500-mile hike to the Kenyan border was the hope that the Kenyan government would let them in (Ali, 1998). After the United Nations finally intervened, the Kenyan border was opened. Some 1.5 million Somalis fled Somalia (Gardner & Bushra, 2004). Survival skills were mandatory in the refugee camps too, as lack of food and medicine were common in addition to corruption (Farid, & McMahan, 2004).

While every refugee has his/her own story, the reality is that the Somali people have experienced far more than most in America who teach them English have the ability to comprehend. Some experts feel that, “the physical wounds inflicted by torture may heal, but the invisible psychological wounds of such abuse endure much longer” (Lucey, Chaffee, Terry, Le Marbre, Stone, & Wiencek, 2000, pg. 6). Post-war trauma is common, and fear and distrust are likely to accompany it. It is estimated that 35 percent of Somali refugees have been tortured and all have lost nearly every material item owned. In addition, it is likely that many students have not had previous formal education before coming to America (Farid & McMahan, 2004). Adjustment to a new country takes time.

Somali Culture

The majority of Somalis are Muslim. It is important for educators of Somali students to have some general knowledge about Muslims’ lives so they will have some understanding of why their students may be acting in a certain way. The three examples

given below are common in the school arena (Farid & McMahan, 2004). *A* is the observed behavior and *B* is the underlying religious value or belief.

- **A.** Teachers may see students facing east and praying after lunch.
 - B.** In Islam, it is important to pray a recited prayer five times a day facing Mecca.
- **A.** Teachers may see women wearing a head covering called a *hejab*.
 - B.** Islamic law requires that when a woman is in public, she is to cover her entire body with the exception of the face and hands.
- **A.** Muslim students may refuse to eat the school lunch fearing that it contains pork or even food made with pork products.
 - B.** Islamic law requires that meat eaten is *halal* or slaughtered in a certain way, and eating pork is forbidden.

The Somali refugee family structure is often broken. Many Somali mothers who have come to America with their children are raising them by themselves because many men were killed in the war. In America, single mothers have the pressure of supporting their families financially. An additional difficulty is the role reversal that often comes as children take on responsibilities such as paying a bill or interpreting at school or at the doctor's office for a parent who is unable to read or communicate in English. Adapting to a new culture takes less time for children; many times they become the parent while the real adult feels helpless (Farid & McMahan, 2004; Kahin, 1997).

A sound transition to American culture may involve being part of a "safe" school community with others who are also adapting. However, there is little or no previous

research which looks at Somali refugee students' and their parents' perceptions of and perspectives on school environments. I searched for such studies and found little. One study of Somali children in elementary school suggests that literacy is embedded in cultural, racial and religious differences and suggests that Somali children can be better integrated into schools through validating these differences (Masny & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 1999). Student education was briefly addressed in a study about a Somali community needs assessment. The study reported Somali teens suggesting they were having difficulty with school because they were being placed in classes according to their age rather than their ability level (Robillos, 2001). I did not find studies specifically researching Somali students and school environments. Through interviewing individuals, this paper will attempt to look more closely at why students and parents have chosen a content-based, sheltered English environment.

As the literature review shows, there are positives and negatives for each of the three models (bilingual, mainstreaming, and content-based, sheltered ESL.) Long-term bilingual education programs produce higher graduation rates, but it is difficult and costly to find qualified teachers for multiple languages. Mainstreaming integrates students with peers immediately but is too difficult for high school ESL students who are new to the country. Content-based, sheltered ESL meets students where they are academically, but does not allow for much interaction with native English-speaking peers. The question remains - what is it about the atmosphere, the social arena, and the classes themselves within the content-based, sheltered environment that causes students to come after being

in a mainstream environment? The next chapter will discuss the method used to gather data to attempt to answer this question.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Chapter Two provided a brief history of three models of ESL instruction with an in-depth look at content-based, sheltered English instruction. The question posed is: What educational and social factors play into students' and parents' choice of a content-based, sheltered English program for high school ESL students rather than a mainstream environment? This chapter will outline my methods for data collection, describe the school involved, and give a brief overview of the participants in the study.

Data Collection

Quantitative and qualitative are the two research roads. Quantitative research generally works with numbers and statistics to draw conclusions from samples to populations (Perry, 2005). The method of research used here is qualitative. I chose qualitative over quantitative because I wanted to interact with my participants rather than give them a survey and gather statistics. Qualitative research exhibits how puzzle pieces work together to form an entire picture. The research focuses on process, meaning, and understanding to have as an end result a descriptive product using words and pictures rather than numbers. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; thus, the researcher often goes to the people or environment he/she is researching. The lack of specified structure in this kind of research can be attractive because it allows the researcher to alter direction in data collection in pursuit of

answering his/her question. Finally, qualitative research usually builds theories rather than testing existing theory (Merriam, 1998).

The medium for interaction in my research was personal interaction in the form of interviewing. I chose interviewing over written questionnaires for several reasons. First, I was concerned that the people I wanted to receive information from might have difficulty understanding the questions. Reading a questionnaire and understanding the questions could be challenging for ESL students and their parents. More importantly, speaking with someone about their experience allows for more insight into life experiences than a questionnaire. In addition, the Somali culture is historically oral. I also am a familiar face with the students at my school; my hope was that they would be more willing to talk openly with someone they had interacted with. (The school enrolls about 250 students.)

The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for specific questions to be asked, yet open-ended enough to allow me the freedom to pursue whatever direction interviewees took in response. I followed several guidelines in the formation of the interview questions. First, many of the questions were open-ended to allow the interviewees to respond on their own terms. Second, each question contained only one idea. Finally, the questions were phrased at a linguistic level appropriate to learners of English (McKay, 2006). I interviewed students and parents of students to see why they chose to transfer to a sheltered, content-based environment from a mainstream environment. My desire was to hear people's educational stories. I was interested in fieldwork, going to the people I wanted to hear from and interacting with them.

At the same time, I realized that I have my own biases regarding this research and my school. To enhance validity, triangulation was used. Triangulation is the use of several methods to confirm the data that emerges (Merriam, 1998). First, I have presented direct quotations from participants along with my own interpretations so readers can check their interpretations against my own. Second, two outside readers who are colleagues and familiar with my school and context checked my interpretations and provided feedback. Reader suggestions were considered and incorporated into the text.

Dhahdin Charter School

This research took place at a charter high school site for ESL students located in a metropolitan area in the Midwestern United States. Students' schedules have six classes covering various content areas, all of which are taught in English. The school has approximately 70% Somali students, 20% Oromo and Amharic students from Ethiopia, and 10% Latino students. The African students have primarily come through the cities and refugee camps in Kenya. Due to the large numbers of Somali students at the school, this capstone focuses on the Somali community.

The interviewees had a minimum of six months of school experience in the mainstream environment prior to a minimum of six months of experience in our content-based, sheltered environment. This information was obtained through the school office. In my view, the six months or more time period allowed students and parents to make a valid comparison between their experiences in a mainstream versus a sheltered environment.

All student interviews were voluntary and did not affect class grades. I sought out five Somali students and five Somali parents with different educational backgrounds.

Translators within the school assisted with parent interviews.

In addition to our currently enrolled students, I looked for a small group (three to five) of young people fitting the above criteria who had graduated from our high school. I sought out students who are employed, as well as those who are continuing their education at a technical or community college. My purpose in including this category was to see if there were parallels in responses, and if time away from our sheltered environment caused students to perceive things differently.

All interviews were taped upon permission from the interviewee. All participants were guaranteed anonymity; pseudonyms were used throughout the study. I attempted to provide enough background of the individuals participating to provide some context for the readers, yet was selective enough not to compromise my guarantee of anonymity. Complete transcription was made of the recordings to ensure accuracy in understanding each interview and the results found. The tape served as a backup for confirmation on parallels and contrasts between interviews.

Human Subject Selection

Student records were reviewed, and students and parents were selected with regard to several different factors. Hamline University's International Review Board procedures were followed. The goal was to find participants with varying backgrounds to see if there were parallel threads running through their choices for a content-based, sheltered school. Factors included amount of formal education in their home country,

amount of education in America, gender, age upon entry into America, and presence of family in America.

Method of Analysis

The interview questions were divided into sections consisting of family background, educational background in home country, and educational experiences in America. All responses were taped, and a transcription of each interview was made after listening to the tape in order to analyze the responses given. The transcription was typed as I listened to the tape. I stopped, rewound, and played each interview several times in order to type all of the words spoken. Hesitations and laughs were noted in the written transcription to assist my memory as I read through them later. After each interview was transcribed, I listened again, reading my transcription at the same time to ensure accuracy.

I used coding to analyze the data. Coding is assigning some short-hand marking to the data so that it can be easily retrieved (Merriam, 1998). I used different colored highlighters to mark the themes found. Multiple themes emerged through the students', graduates', and parents' voices; I chose three reoccurring themes that threaded themselves through across the interviewees' responses. Quotations that paralleled the themes and gave insight into why something was said were pulled from the transcriptions. The quotations served as voices to give credibility to my interpretation of themes. Two peer readers checked my interpretation and provided feedback.

Conclusion

This chapter describes the methods for data collection that took place to answer the question: What factors play into students' and parents' choice of a content-based,

sheltered English program for high school ESL students rather than a mainstream environment? In the following chapter, the people interviewed, specific themes that emerged, and results of the interviews will be discussed in detail.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Chapter Three introduced the process of qualitative data collection in this project. Students, parents, and graduates were interviewed about their educational experiences. The question posed was: What educational and social factors play into students' and parents' choice of a content-based, sheltered English program for high school ESL students rather than a mainstream environment where ESL students are placed in classes along with the native-speaking population for some or all of the day? The chapter begins with variables I encountered as the interviewing process unfolded. This will be followed by a brief biography of each individual interviewed. Analysis of results and discussion will follow. Other interesting items will complete the chapter.

The Interviewing Experience

Before addressing the results of this project, it is imperative to discuss some of the unforeseen variables I encountered as I began to collect the research data. I have learned more about Somali culture through my interviewing process than I did about why a select group of people chose a particular kind of school. In some ways, I believe both of these factors are so intertwined that it is difficult to separate them. I began the interviewing process with clear-cut parameters about whom I would interview and what I wanted to learn; I have learned that in research very little is clear-cut.

Finding candidates among parents and graduates who fit the criteria I was looking for, had a working phone number, and were willing to come in and be taped proved to be

much more challenging than I had anticipated. I began the calling process after graduates and parents were identified and received many “nos” or “I am too busy to come in...” I quickly learned that if I was going to succeed with this project, I needed the assistance of my Somali co-workers. A phone call or personal communication from one of them produced results that a phone call or personal communication from me could not have produced. There were times when they called or talked to several people to obtain the telephone number of someone I was looking for. I was surprised by the complexity of the connections between these people, and it was only through the network of co-workers that the interviews happened.

I also found that because I had essentially no relationship with the parents (except one), I was often met with suspicion. Parents wondered why I wanted to interview them and what I would do with the tape. I soon realized that while the taping was beneficial to me, at times it seemed a real barrier to the authenticity of people’s responses. An additional barrier was the more formal atmosphere of signing the consent form before we began. I suspect that small introductions only would have laid the foundation for more immediate comfortableness between myself and the interviewee rather than signing a consent form. Signing the form added a different tone to the beginning of the interview. There were times when I suspected that people were telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. At the same time, I felt that others were extremely honest and open with me, and I am thankful for the tape which enabled me to listen word-for-word to their responses. In addition, the tape provided me with deeper insight into factors such as tone of voice and hesitation in answering a question versus no hesitation. A typical written

transcription cannot capture seconds of silence between a question and a response. The tape also allowed me to listen to each person's response rather than rely on my memory of what each individual had said.

Several times I was already in the middle of an interview before I realized that the student or parent did not fit the criteria I thought they did. In one such case, the mother of a 19-year-old son did not even know her son had transferred schools until he told her. I immediately understood what had happened. As we allow students to enroll themselves if they are over 18, he had registered himself. This mother also came in with a daughter who translated almost everything for her; she could not have enrolled her son at our school without the help of a translator. The data from this interview was included because the mother added cultural insight I thought was important.

Another parent almost refused to allow me to interview him after he came in and was very skeptical of the tape recorder. He finally told me that because I was the same age as his daughter and because he wanted to help me as he would his daughter, I could proceed. After the interview, he asked me to play the tape back to him before the interview ended. I did, and he allowed me to keep the tape.

Although I needed a translator for only two interviews, language was a barrier in both asking the questions and understanding the responses. I have carefully listened to the tapes several times to try to understand what was really being said and how that person wanted to say it. As a result, I have corrected some of the grammatical errors within the quotations I use in this paper to enhance readability while trying very hard to maintain the accuracy of what was being said.

All interviews took place at the school with the exception of one which was at a participant's home. Interviews were conducted before or after school or during the school day. Interview length was generally between 15 and 25 minutes.

I carefully listened to each interview and transcribed each one in full. Next, I color-coded sections that contained parallel threads. The sections relevant to my research question were identified and three themes emerged from the information gathered. These themes will be discussed later in this chapter.

Participants

My original intent was to interview five students, five parents, and three to five graduates who fit my criteria; i.e., the student had spent a minimum of six months in a large mainstream high school prior to spending a minimum of six months at our sheltered, content-based school. Because of some of the challenges mentioned above, it was not possible to interview the number of people I had originally intended to interview. I do have interviews from five current students. I interviewed seven different parents, two with the help of translators; however, in the middle of interviews with three parents, I realized that they did not fit the criteria I was looking for. Yet, these parents did provide me with some important cultural information, and as a result, I have decided to include information about them and some of their insights later in this paper. It should be noted that the parents interviewed are not related to the students interviewed. Of the three graduates I interviewed, only one fit my criteria. However, the others provided significant insights into why they chose to come to our school. Their information will be included as well.

The following section will give a brief background of each of the participants within each category. Commonalities within each group and parallel threads that run across groups will be discussed. To maintain anonymity, all participants have been given pseudonyms. The following charts give a snapshot of the participants.

Table 4.1
Current Students

Name	Gender	Age at Entry to US	Prior Education	Length of time in mainstream high school
Ahmed	M	18	several years of private tutoring in Kenya	2 years
Deqo	F	5	NA	3.5 years
Hibo	F	18	several years in private school in Kenya	1 year
Mohamed	M	16	no break in education - attended school in Ethiopia	more than 2 years
Liban	M	13	moved to Kenya when two - attended public school	more than 2 years

Table 4.2
Graduates

Name	Gender	Age at Entry to US	Prior Education
Ali	M	14	2-3 years in Somalia
Mustafe	M	15	2 hours/day of private tutoring for 1 year in Africa
Jamal	M	12	none

Table 4.3

Parents

Name	Gender	Number of Years in US	Family Member at School
Abdirizaq	M	25	son
Aydurus	M	11	nephew
Asad	M	15	son & daughter
Ifrah	F	17	son & daughter
Adan	M	7	son
Hani	F	7	son
Dhool	F	14	daughter

Current Students – Overview

All of the five students interviewed were born in East Africa and came to America with more than one family member. However, their educational backgrounds and the age at which they came to America varied. I had only had two of the students previously in classes, but had had interactions with the others prior to the interviews. Of the three groups interviewed, I felt this one was the most honest and open with me overall, perhaps because I am a familiar face to them.

Ahmed

Ahmed was born in Somalia. His family fled to Nairobi, Kenya, when he was young because of the civil war. When he was 18, he arrived in the U.S. While in Kenya, Ahmed was tutored privately several hours a day for several years. He told me he began to learn English there when he was ten years old. He also told me his family rarely went outside the place where they lived because they could have gotten in trouble with the police since they were Somali. They might not have had the right kind of ID. That was also the reason they did not go out for school. So, the first time Ahmed went to school full time was when he was 18 in America.

His first days at the large, mainstream, Midwestern high school he enrolled in were difficult as he didn't know what a schedule was, and he had trouble understanding what others were saying to him in English. He stayed at that high school for two years, but left because he was getting older. He was concerned that he would not graduate from that school. At that time, Ahmed had several options, but chose Dhahdin Charter because of the recommendation of friends.

Deqo

Deqo was born in Somalia and came to America when she was five. She vaguely remembers traveling to the U.S. and first went to school in this country. She stressed the importance of education to her and her family as her mother was never able to finish elementary school in Somalia. Her family lived on the East Coast for a year before moving to the Midwest. On the East Coast, she began kindergarten and was in the racial minority in her class: “It was me and this one African kid; I think he was African-American to be exact. Everybody else was American, and they were lighter and (laugh) for some reason, I wondered why we looked different. I fell in love with the nice, straight blond hair.” Deqo said there was no one in her class who spoke her language at that time, so she learned English alongside her mainstream peers. She alluded to feeling different and suggested that her family moved to our city in the Midwest because there were more opportunities and less racism. She said her city on the East Coast had, “...kind of bad racism...and after we moved, I kind of heard that more Somalis came and I guess they got treated badly due to they’re different than everybody.”

Deqo attended two mainstream high schools before enrolling at Dhahdin Charter. She attended an inner city school for two and a half years and then transferred to a suburban high school for a year because “my sister bought a house there, so I went there for a while to see a different environment.” She came to Dhahdin when she moved back to the city.

Hibo

Hibo was born in Somalia and came to America with a sister and brother when she was 18. She spent approximately six years in Kenya before coming to America and attended a private school there beginning at age 14. She took two years of classes in English and Swahili at this school. After arriving in America, Hibo spent six months at a welcome center learning English in the Midwest before moving to the city where Dhahdin Charter School is located. She moved to this city because “all my friends lives here, that is why.” Hibo spent a year at a mainstream high school where she enjoyed the classes before transferring to Dhahdin Charter. Her English was limited, and I often had to repeat the questions I asked her.

Mohamed

Mohamed is Somali, but was born in Ethiopia as his parents moved there shortly after the civil war started in Somalia. Mohamed told me they moved to Ethiopia because, “...there was a lot of fighting going down in Somalia, so we, so my mom and my dad lived over there. So actually, I was born over there...” He attended school in Ethiopia until he was 12 years old, and then moved to Kenya for several years before coming to America with his family when he was 16. He had learned some English in Ethiopia and Kenya.

Mohamed spent a year and a half in the southern part of the US where he attended a large mainstream high school and was in the racial minority. He said, “We wasn’t like, we wasn’t many of us, there was three of us, me, my sister, and another girl. You don’t know her, we met her over there. We the only Africans over there.” His family then

moved to the Midwest where he enrolled at a mainstream school. After eight months, he got into a fight with African-Americans and was expelled from that school. Mohamed enrolled at Dhahdin Charter after hearing about it from friends who attended the school.

Liban

Liban was born in Somalia and moved with his family to Kenya when he was a small child. He has no memory of Somalia. Liban attended a tuition school in Kenya and came to America with his family when he was 13. He attended two mainstream high schools before enrolling at Dhahdin Charter School. Liban spent more than a year at a suburban school while living with his sister's family. He transferred to an urban high school for a year after he had decided to move in with other family members; then he transferred to Dhahdin Charter.

Graduates – Overview

Ali

Ali was born in Somalia and came to America with his family when he was 14 years old. He attended several years of primary school in Somalia, spent one year in Kenya for immigration processing, and then came to America. He attended a mainstream inner city high school for two years, a suburban high school for one year, and then Dhahdin Charter for his last year of high school. Ali transferred to the suburban school when he was expelled after a fight at the inner city school. After a year at the suburban school, he moved back to the city and was told about Dhahdin Charter by his uncle. He visited the school and spoke with the principal at Dhahdin Charter several times before

making a decision to transfer there. Ali is currently attending an area community college and is enrolled in ESL classes there.

Mustafe

Mustafe was born in Somalia and came to America when he was 15. His parents were able to come to America four years before he and his siblings arrived. He attended a Dugsi school in Somalia to learn the Qur'an, but started attending school in Kenya for two hours a day to learn to read when he was 14. He first attended school full time in America. He spent two years at a mainstream high school before transferring to Dhahdin Charter on the recommendation of a friend. Mustafe is currently enrolled at an area community college and plans to graduate in one more year.

Jamal

Jamal was born in Somalia and came to America with several family members when he was 12. Jamal first went to school at that time. His family lived on the East Coast for six months before moving to the Midwest. He attended a mainstream high school for two years before transferring to Dhahdin Charter. After finishing high school, Jamal went to an area community college for a year. Then, he took some time off to work so he could send money to family in Africa. As his sister is now supporting the family, he is planning to enroll at an area trade school in the fall.

Parents – Overview

Abdirizaq

Abdirizaq has a son who attends Dhahdin Charter. His son was born in America. Abdirizaq has been in America for 25 years and speaks English fluently. He has a

university education and is a businessman. He believes that parents are the backbone of their children's education. He said that education in Somalia and education in America are much different. In Somalia, students must memorize everything they learn, and a class grade depends entirely on the final test, a test which can be mostly oral. Abdirizaq told me he argued with staff at a school in the Midwest his son attended previously. The school had passed his son from eighth grade to ninth grade, but he didn't want his son to move to the next grade level because he hadn't passed his classes. The school decided to move his son up a grade level anyway so that his morale wouldn't go down. Abdirizaq believes that the opposite is true. He told me,

What's the point of he's going to go to 9th grade? They told me he's going to do 8th grade and 9th grade...he didn't do well when he was in 8th grade, now how come he can do well in two classes? That system, a little bit, I have a problem understanding. They say the morale of the kid will go down, but I think, the way I believe is the other way around. Because if he didn't go there, he know that he did something wrong; he knows that he has to catch up. So to be repeated, the class, I think that is a good way to make sure the kid is ready to go to the next level.

He said that his son is very capable of doing grade-level work but is "playing around."

Abdirizaq's son attended several other charter high schools before transferring to Dhahdin Charter. He feels that large mainstream schools "have more education", and that charter schools "are very limited". One positive of Dhahdin Charter is that he knows some of the Somali staff and will hear "through the grapevine" about his son.

Aydurus

Aydurus is the guardian for a student who attends Dhahdin Charter. He has been in America for 11 years, and graduated from high school in Somalia in the 1970's speaking fluent English. However, he speaks with a thick accent which made it difficult for me to understand him at times. He said that education in America and education in Somalia are very similar. When I further examined his response to my question about education in the two countries, I found he was talking about the length of the school year, and teachers communicating with parents. Aydurus was not thinking about how classes are taught, and at the time, I did not press him for more information. The student for whom Aydurus is the guardian came to America when he was 11; he had not attended school in Somalia or in Kenya. Upon arrival in America, the student enrolled in middle school. He attended two mainstream high schools before transferring to Dhahdin Charter. The student transferred to the second high school because the family moved to a different location within the city.

Asad

Asad is a parent of several recent graduates. He was born in Ethiopia and is fluent in English. He has been in America for 14 years. Asad told me that education is much different in Somalia than in America. In Somalia, students may be beaten if they skip class; here, he feels, teachers and parents can do nothing. He told me,

Here's a little bit different, culture, and back home, you know, we go to school, sleep, not in, you know, skipping the class, you know, the teacher can, if you skip the class, he can, you know, can beat you. You scared, you know, you scared for

your family and your teacher. Here, you cannot touch your son or daughter. If you touch them, you get in trouble, and the kids say, Oh, you cannot do this, very hard really for newcomers to this country...

His son came to America as a young child, and his son feels that he actually improved his Somali by attending Dhahdin Charter as he grew up speaking mostly English. Asad is currently sending his son to a community college 25 minutes away from the city so he will not be influenced by his friends. Asad is glad that his son finished high school at age 16 because now he is acting more like an adult, he feels. However, he is still concerned about his son's and daughter's friends in the US, so he plans to send both of them to college in Ethiopia next fall. In addition, his son will have an arranged marriage when he arrives in Ethiopia to help him "settle down." Asad will continue to support his son financially until he is finished with college. He believes Dhahdin Charter should be stricter with students and enforce speaking only English more firmly.

Ifrah

Ifrah was born in Ethiopia and is the mother of a son and daughter who attend Dhahdin Charter. She has lived in America for 17 years and speaks understandable English. She said the main difference between education in America and education in Somalia is money. She told me that many students in Africa do not have money, so they can not attend school.

Ifrah's two children at Dhahdin Charter were born in America. Her son spent ninth grade at a mainstream high school, but "he liked basketball too much, and didn't do his homework," she said. He transferred to Dhahdin Charter for one semester because he

had a friend attending there; then, there were busing problems, so he transferred to a different mainstream high school for a year and a half. He spent the last year at Dhahdin Charter again as the busing problems were solved. Ifrah also transferred her ninth grade daughter to Dhahdin Charter.

Adan

Adan was born in Somalia and has been in America for seven years. He speaks very little English, and the interview was conducted through a co-worker who is fluent in Somali. Adan believes the difference between education in Somalia and education in America is development. He said the United States is a big country with a lot of technology and supplies, while Somalia is a small, poor country, but he believes the teaching is very similar. Adan's son has been in America for only one year. He was living with relatives in Kenya before coming to America. Adan is unsure if his son attended school in Kenya or not. He is in the process of trying to change his son's date of birth to reflect his real age. As a result of living in a refugee camp, and in the immigration process for coming to America, his birth date was changed. After arriving in the US, Adan's son was enrolled at a mainstream school for just a few weeks before friends told him about Dhahdin Charter. Within a short time, he transferred to Dhahdin. Adan was unable to comment about differences between the two schools.

Hani

Hani was born in Somalia and has been in America for seven years. Her English is quite limited, and her daughter (who is not a student) came with her to translate for her. Hani said that education in America and education in Somalia are quite similar, but here

there is more freedom and there are better educational opportunities. Her son has also been in America for seven years. He attended only a Dugsi school in Africa. (A Dugsi school teaches children the Qu'ran.)

Hani's son's first high school experience in America was in a mainstream school. He was at that school for two years before Hani transferred him to a different Somali charter school. Hani was pleased with that charter school because her son was doing better academically. She said, "When he went to (the charter), he was better than going to (the mainstream). He wasn't excellent, but he was kind of OK." So she was surprised when her son came home at the beginning of the following school year to tell her that he had transferred himself to Dhahdin Charter. He had friends attending there, and he chose, as an adult, to transfer himself. Hani remains concerned about her son and remained after the interview was concluded to speak with our counselor and her son's teachers about the progress he was making at Dhahdin Charter. While Hani had talked with office staff many times on the phone, this was the first time she had ever personally come to Dhahdin Charter. Hani said through her daughter's translation, "...the first time she come here is the first time today, but she call (office staff) and contact to her and ask about him. She said even though he's nineteen, I try to talk to teachers and ask about him. I love my son and I want him to learn more..." Connecting her with my colleagues and passing on her son's mid-term grade report (which had been given out the prior evening to parents and students) became a higher purpose for her time at the school that day.

Dhool

Dhool was born in Somalia and has been in America for 14 years. Though her English was limited, we were able to understand each other well enough to conduct the interview. She has a daughter at Dhahdin Charter who came to America with her. They spent one year in the southern part of the US before moving to the Midwest. Her daughter attended two mainstream high schools before she was sent to court for being chronically truant. When asked why, Dhool responded, “I don’t know, because many times they call me. I go, I talk her, I talk her, because she’s a teenager. I talk her, she very confused, then, another teenager girl skipped, that’s why.” The court ordered her to attend a specific high school where her attendance improved.

After the court-ordered placement had ended, Dhool wanted her daughter to return to the mainstream high school, but her daughter had heard about Dhahdin Charter through some friends and was adamant that she wanted to enroll there. Dhool allowed her to enroll but did not comment about differences between the two environments.

Analysis and Discussion

The question was: What educational and social factors play into students’ and parents’ choice of a content-based, sheltered English program for high school ESL students rather than a mainstream environment where ESL students are placed in classes along with the native-speaking population for some or all of the day? Three common threads emerged from the responses I received from current students, graduates, and parents. The responses I received fell into three categories:

1. classroom climate
2. ease and extras
3. school culture

Classroom Climate

The issue of classroom climate was a dominant theme in student responses. Even though some felt that English should be used more, the presence of Somali speakers and the use of Somali in the school was a major factor in the decision to attend Dhahdin.

Students said they felt more comfortable in the classroom when they were instructed bilingually or were able to speak their first language in class. That comfort level increased when there were others in the class who shared the same struggles and when the teacher took the time to explain what a word or concept meant. The research reported that ESL students are often uncomfortable around native English-speaking peers because they are frequently laughed at for their mistakes (Pappamihiel, 2002; Wright, 2004). In addition, in Curtin's (2005) research, teachers take less time to explain concepts when native English-speakers are in the same class as ESL students. One graduate said,

It (Dhahdin Charter) was a place that I could fit in, and I was surrounded by students who were basically like me, and we could get together. The teachers in here knew what I was going through and they helped me directly one-to-one, and they didn't mind. They looked forward to helping me and others like me, so there wasn't a big deal. (Mustafe)

Aydurus and his nephew heard about Dhahdin Charter through friends who said that there were good teachers there who could help him learn English well. Aydurus felt

that the Somali staff at Dhahdin Charter give invaluable help to students by also teaching them in their first language. He said, "...some Somali people, they was teaching this school, and talking about the language, what is better for their future..." Aydurus feels very strongly about the importance of Somali taught and used in the classroom. The student, Deqo, suggested the school should have two teachers in every class, a Somali and an American, because "if a teacher always explains in Somali, the students aren't going to learn how to speak the language right."

Parents also appreciated the personal attention to students' educational needs available at Dhahdin Charter. Parents expressed their gratefulness for the Somali staff who use Somali with students within the school as well as for the ESL teachers who focus on English. Aydurus added that he had come in many times to talk with Dhahdin Charter school's principal (who is not bilingual) about how his student was doing, and he was very appreciative of the time he was given.

Class size adds another dimension to the comfortable classroom climate. Charter schools and sheltered, content-based English programs tend to be considerably smaller than mainstream schools. Dhool's daughter felt that because Dhahdin Charter was smaller, she could get the individual attention she wanted. Dhool told me, "She say I don't need (the mainstream), I don't need (the mainstream). I need this school. Then I say, no go, you stay big school because this school is small. She say no, no, I need this one, that's why. I'm not help the teacher, she say, I'm not with the teacher. Small students, I help the teacher. That's why I need it, I don't know, she say that." My best understanding of this quote is that the daughter means she is not receiving the help she

desires from her teachers in the mainstream environment, but is receiving that help in the smaller environment.

Ali, another graduate, added, “I got a lot of help when I came to this school because we have 20 people in the class. All the teachers, they have time to explain to us the things we were doing. I really liked it, you know, the years I was here.” Ali told me he appreciated the individual help he received in his classes. He said if he had stayed at the mainstream school, he would still be there. “I would be a super senior,” he said. Jamal also expressed gratitude for the smaller class sizes at Dhahdin Charter and for the ESL classes he had there. “Here there’s like more teachers are focused on helping you in ESL”, he said. “...and then over here, like less people so the teacher would give you more time to help you and to help every student cause there’s like less students taking the classes.”

Mustafe said the mainstream environment was too big for him. He did not receive the help he needed and he was surrounded by people who had had the benefit of going to elementary school and middle school while he had not had that opportunity and needed extra assistance. “...it was just too big an environment for me to be in. I was mixed with a lot of people that had the education background, they went to middle school...,” he said.

In my experience, I have had students every semester at Dhahdin who were so eager to learn that they freely gave up their lunch or came in early before school or stayed after to receive one-on-one individual help. Students who have not had much prior

education before coming to America may feel more awkward in a large place where the school environment is new to them. Size matters to students.

I believe this fits intricately into the success they can find at Dhahdin. Students can find success because they are placed in classes which fit their ability level. Eight different levels of instruction are offered at Dhahdin. Seven of the fifteen participants interviewed transferred to Dhahdin on the recommendation of friends who knew about the school. As a teacher, this is the most common response I receive when I ask a new student how they heard about Dhahdin. There is something at a sheltered, content-based environment that fits what students are looking for.

It is important to remember, as mentioned in the research, (Mabbott, 2005) that while a strength of this kind of environment is meeting students where they are academically, a constant challenge is keeping the standards high and the students challenged. In my experience, this involves understanding where they are academically, while raising the bar slightly above their English level to push them.

Instructional material and methods which made learning easier also made Dhahdin Charter attractive to student respondents. Jamal notes, “Here there’s like more teachers are focused on helping you in ESL.” The content area classes that had an ESL component had a great impact on students who may have had several years of English, but were not at the same level as their mainstream peers. For example, an American History class taught in a mainstream school may be considerably more challenging than the same class taught with an ESL focus. In this context, Mustafe said about the mainstream environment: “I had to go to class with students that knows everything, and I

won't have the understand. I was just sitting there, and I may not even ask a question, or I don't know how to ask if I want to..."

Clearly students felt that sheltered, content-based school classrooms fill a gap for the older teen who has had little prior education and who cannot keep up in a mainstream environment. I have also had students who were having behavioral problems at the mainstream school who over time settled down in my class. I believe teaching them at a level where they could understand and succeed was a significant part of why they had a positive experience at Dhahdin.

Ease and Extras

A second theme is ease. The content-based ESL classes are more accessible than mainstream classes because vocabulary and the reading level of materials are controlled. Research verifies that in content-based, sheltered ESL schools, many students have little or no English proficiency and limited or interrupted previous schooling (Boyson & Short, 2003; Dufresne & Hall, 1997; Mabbott, 2005). Students have greater success in what is essentially an ESL environment. Liban told me,

I used to go to mainstream schools, you know, the classes used to be hard, man. I didn't like it. I'm telling you the truth, you know, they used to be hard. But right here, they're understandable, easy...it was at this school, you know, that I passed my state graduation tests...

Hani felt the mainstream school was too difficult for her son and wanted him in a smaller environment where he would receive more one-on-one help. "No matter how hard you try, if you don't start going to school when you're little, it's going to be more

hard for you. If you start eighth grade or ninth grade, yeah, it's going to be hard for you," she said.

Dhahdin Charter has a day school and a night school program. This allows students to accumulate credits more quickly. Hibo, a student who was enrolled all day, told me, "...it's very different because at (the mainstream school) I take only seven classes, and this school I take ten classes every day. And then, this school has a lot, you know, homework center there in the middle, like every day, and (the mainstream school) doesn't have that." Jamal heard about the school through a friend and said he needed "emergency credits," so he transferred to Dhahdin Charter to finish his required credits. There are numbers of students who want to graduate before they are too old for high school. These students transfer to Dhahdin Charter in order to attend school day and night so they can accumulate credits more quickly.

The homework center after school at Dhahdin Charter is staffed by native English-speaking volunteers. Many of the volunteers are area university students who are looking for a place to fulfill their community service course requirements. This after school hour provides the ESL student with one-on-one or small group help in a subject area they are struggling with. The homework center is often filled with students who need additional help that their teachers cannot always give them in class. Hibo expressed appreciation for the homework help at Dhahdin. She stated, "...and then this school has a lot, you know homework center there in the middle, like every day, and (the mainstream high school) doesn't have that. You go to the library if you need help. You talk to a teacher if you have time."

Several students and parents alluded to needing fewer credits to graduate from Dhahdin Charter. Deqo told me, “And, like, I need less credits here. The other school is 63, here is 43.” When I asked Ifrah why she transferred her son to Dhahdin Charter, she indicated that she believed he needed fewer credits to graduate. “I wanted he to graduate. And (mainstream school) is 56 credits and here it is just 40 something, and I wanted...his credit, you know a little bit down...”

This is a misperception. Dhahdin Charter’s school year is divided into semesters, while the mainstream school year in our city is divided into trimesters. All schools are able to follow their own system as long as they align with the state requirements: 21.5 (full year) credits for graduation. As Dhahdin Charter is on a semester system, the state requirements are doubled to equal 43, while schools on a trimester system require approximately 60 credits. It only appears, therefore, that the requirements for graduation from Dhahdin Charter are lower than at other schools. That appearance, coupled with the possibility of taking night school classes and earning credits at a faster pace, made Dhahdin Charter a more attractive choice for some students.

Additional factors were more practical. One of these was convenience. Hibo transferred to Dhahdin Charter because it was much closer to her full-time job, and she didn’t have a car. “Because I work downtown...and I don’t have a car. I don’t have any help, that is why I am changing...”, she said. Dhahdin is located in an area with a high population of Somalis. It is also very accessible by city bus.

Dhahdin Charter has a later start time than many area high schools. Liban told me he transferred to Dhahdin Charter because he had a brother attending there, and when he

saw the later time his brother got on the bus to go to school, he wanted to sleep in too.

Liban told me,

I came over here cause, first thing, you know, to tell you the truth, I didn't like waking up around 6:00, you know. I used to see my little brother go to school over there, you know...so I was like, usually I wake up like 6:30 and wait outside for the bus. But now I wake up around like 7:30 or 7:40, and now I have enough rest, and I can learn more, you know. Instead of me sleeping in the class every morning, you know.

School Culture

Finally, students and parents felt that Dhahdin Charter offered a safer environment where they felt at home. Ahmed stated, "I like my people, I feel like I am home, that's the main thing that I come to this school, you know." He also added he feels proud to be at Dhahdin Charter. The teachers employed at Dhahdin Charter add to the safer environment. Many teachers have lived overseas for an extended period of time and have first-hand experience of what it is like to live in a different country/culture and not be fluent in the language. Mustafe told me,

...here was like being home to me, and the teachers was the kind of teachers that know our culture and teachers that knew our religion, respect...teachers that knew what was going on, so there was no big issue of misunderstanding that was happening in here...but over there, there may be a misunderstanding that come in a way ...here there was no such thing like that. All the students and teachers get along and there was understanding.

I got a further glimpse into the “misunderstandings” that take place as students shared stories about whom they got into a fight with. Mohamed said, “I was at (a mainstream school) I think eight months, some kids, some African-American kids, so I got into a fight with them, so they kick me out from school.” I pressed him for the more information. He told me the story,

Some kids, some African-American kids, so I got into a fight with them, so they kick me out from school. The fight, because it was, they just like jumping every Somali that walking by, like they like to jump them, so they was thinking like, the people, they jumping and something...one day there was three people and they jumped me, so one of them, I poked them with a pen, I poked them with a pen so they kicked me out.

It appears, therefore, that safety and a school they can call “their own” is a high priority. There is considerable tension between Somalis and African-Americans in the city in which Dhahdin Charter is located. Gangs on either side have formed, and the Somali parents in this study expressed concern.

The fact that Dhahdin Charter provides a safe environment where Somali cultural and religious practices can be maintained was a big advantage for parents. Parents expressed concern about their children becoming “Americanized.” Somali culture can be maintained at the school because the school has mostly Somali students. Several parents brought up their concerns about the difficulties between Somali and African-American culture in the mainstream schools. They are especially concerned about the influence of

the African-American gang community on their children. Parents felt that at Dhahdin Charter, students could avoid those conflicts.

Dress, language, and religion were the three aspects of Somali culture that parents felt could be maintained to a greater extent at Dhahdin Charter. Islamic law requires that a woman in public cover her body with the exception of the face and hands (Farid & McMahan, 2004). Ifrah transferred her ninth grade daughter to Dhahdin Charter. She said her daughter used to wear jeans, but now she is wearing skirts and covering her head. Ifrah is glad that her daughter is dressing in a more Muslim way. Ifrah commented, "...you know (my daughter), she have to look, my daughter, the religion, how the all the girls have to wear the clothes, she born here, she used to have to wear pants and whatever I want she to know, it's good now, she wearing skirts, she cover her hair."

A Somali colleague told me that before the Civil War in Somalia, women did not cover themselves from head to foot. Ifrah's concern that her daughter dress in a Muslim way suggests to me that interpretation of culture and religion was adapted after the Civil War to maintain identity. Because of our large Somali population, the peer pressure may be higher at Dhahdin to maintain that identity.

Asad's son passed a test enabling him to enroll at Dhahdin Charter even though he was younger than high school age. As a result, he was able to graduate from high school at a younger age than most other graduates. Asad pushed his son to graduate early because he was concerned about him taking on too much of the American culture. "The reason I did it," he said, "if he stays in high school until this year, he's going to be like African-Americans, not Somali, that's why I asked the principal, please help me." Asad

is employed at the school and enrolled his children at Dhahdin Charter so he could “watch them”. Abdirizaq implied that he finds out “through the grapevine” if his student is misbehaving because of Asad’s presence at Dhahdin.

Asad told me,

...all the parents, they have a lot of problems, you know, some of them, they just visit (the mainstream and charter schools) and then the way the students are acting, they don’t like it, and then the reason they like this school is you know, they get some Muslim prayers, Islam, they pray on time, then they like this school...you know when they go to another school, completely after six, seven months, one year they change; they take on new culture, American culture. The Somalis don’t like that, that’s why sometimes they like this school; it is a big difference.

When I continued to ask this parent what he meant by culture, he added,

The Somali family, all the newcomers, they have a lot of problems...if you go (to a well-known Somali area) at night time, you see a lot of Somali smoking, drugs, drinking, they don’t like that. Sometimes, they just plan, you know, to take their kids back home. All of them. Under 18. The kids here, when they become 18, that’s it, it’s over. They say, “Oh, when I’m 18 you cannot take me back home,” something like that.

The reference here to taking students back home is probably taking students back to Africa. This was not the first time I had heard about the practice of sending children “back to Africa”. A handful of students from our school have been sent back to Africa

for a year or two because their families did not know what else to do and felt that being surrounded by traditional values might “save” their student.

It is also important to note here that the word family usually does not mean a nuclear family of two parents with children. Many of our students are virtually on their own; they may have come to the US with a cousin or an extended family member. If they do have a parent, it is usually their mother. There are many more mothers than fathers here partly because many men were killed in the civil war, and partly because, as many students have told me, their mother is a second or third wife. In Islam, men may marry up to four wives; thus, a woman’s husband may be living in a different part of the US or the world with a different wife. The principal of Dhahdin Charter, one of my peer reviewers, added that parents have suggested to him that the lack of a husband in the house seems to adversely affect behavior of the students, especially the young men. The problem of controlling children’s behavior and maintaining cultural and religious practices is intensified when parents do not speak English. They simply do not know what to do in this environment and find it difficult to ask.

I was given new insight into the Somali community by both the responses of students and parents and by my own experience in using my co-workers’ networking skills to arrange a time to talk with each person. The Somali community is very close-knit and relationship-oriented. The African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child,” became more real to me as several parents told me a teacher plays the role of a second parent to students, and I was expected to fulfill that role.

It is important to mention here that while education may be much more strict in Somalia as several parents implied, many of our students have had little or no exposure to that form of education because of the civil war and the disruption to the entire country that that has brought. Many Somali students have little or no prior school experience in Africa to draw on.

There are approximately eight smaller charter and public schools in this city that are very similar to our content-based, sheltered environment with a Somali population. Charter schools each have a specific focus that tends to draw like-minded students. I have been told by our counselor that over 50% of the transcript requests we receive from other schools come from these eight schools almost identical to ours. It is interesting to note Hani's comment that her son was doing better at a charter school (not Dhahdin Charter) compared to the mainstream school because she spoke directly with his teachers there. Somali students seem to be attracted to this type of smaller school environment.

Other Interesting Items

It is interesting to note that all the students interviewed liked the inner city mainstream schools better than the suburban mainstream schools. Deqo said, "I couldn't stand it," referring to the suburban school. I sensed the reason for her discomfort was the lack of diversity in suburban schools and the distinct feeling of being "different." Regarding the inner city school, she said, "There were more people like me who were Somali and more Americanized Somalian." Another reason Deqo wanted to be in the inner city school may have had to do with success and the ability to compete more with peers. Greater populations of immigrants and refugees tend to live in the city. Students

told me they were not in ESL classes in the city, but were placed in those classes in the suburbs.

Liban suggested that there are too many Somalis at Dhahdin Charter and he is at odds with some of the newcomers. He said,

...too much of my people here man...the newcomers, you know what I'm saying, and we've been here for like a little longer than them and they think they're better than us...how about a kid that is 21 years old or older than that coming over here and telling you stuff man while you're enjoying your high school here. I don't learn with people like that, you know. Or, they might ask the teachers the same old question again and again...

Another student expressed the opposite point of view. Mohamed thinks the newcomers influence him in a positive way. He states:

I like to learn from Africa people that just got here right now, cause that's the ones who be focused," he said. "The kids who have been here a long time, I don't think they want to learn something, they always make jokes or laugh...

Later on he added this: "If I'm with bad people, I'm not going to learn something; if I'm with good people I might learn something." It is interesting to note that Liban arrived in America when he was 13 and Mohamed was 16 when he came. In my experience, 15 appears to be a crucial age. Students who enter school before this age tend to learn spoken English quickly and have a greater chance of being swayed by American peers into behavior their parents disapprove of. Students who enter the American system at 16 or older may be more likely to be focused on learning English and high school graduation.

They may have a greater sense that the limited years they have in high school, before they are too old, are precious.

The parent Abdirizaq suggested Dhahdin needs more individualized education. This parent also mentioned that he was disappointed to see that his son had changed his schedule to exclude math. Abdirizaq said he had not been notified by the school, and he felt he should have been involved in this decision as his son is only 17.

The lack of sports has come up in classes I teach at Dhahdin. Soccer is popular, especially with the young men, and there have been several student attempts to start a team. I believe this lack of extra-curricular activities is an additional reason we tend to attract older students who are more focused on learning English and graduation. The students I interviewed had varying opinions about sports. Jamal, a graduate, said, “At (the mainstream), there was like about the activities that we used to take and here they don’t have it, like basketball, and, you know, they don’t offer many things.”

The graduate, Mustafe, addressed sports at Dhahdin in a different way, ...if you have so many homework to do, you don’t worry about playing time, so students like me weren’t going to get involved in those kind of programs cause there’s no time for them, or they wouldn’t even understand the programs or they can’t be part of the team cause they may not understand each other. So that was one thing that was interesting, even if I like to, I would love to play stuffs like that, but it just, I wouldn’t cause of the other things I wanted and I don’t regret; I feel good about coming here and graduating from here, and that’s why I’m still a student, and you guys did a good job.

Summary

This chapter described the interview process followed in an attempt to answer the question why high school students would transfer from a large mainstream educational setting to a small, content-based, sheltered English program. Participant's lives were narrated in their own voices and themes emerged. The following chapter, the conclusion, summarizes what was learned through this research, considers implications and limitations of the research, and recommends possibilities for additional research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Chapter Four introduced the results of the research. Students, graduates, and parents were interviewed to answer the question: What educational and social factors play into students' and parents' choice of a content-based, sheltered English program for high school students rather than a mainstream environment where ESL students are placed in classes along with the native-speaking population for some or all of the day? This chapter will discuss a summary of findings, the complications and limitations of the study, implications for educators and administrators, and suggestions for future research.

Summary of Findings

Three themes emerged from the interviews conducted with students, graduates, and parents. The first theme was that a comfortable climate in the classroom affected students' choice of a school. Students and parents agreed there was an atmosphere of comfort in the classrooms at Dhahdin, one in which teachers respect their culture and give additional assistance in ESL. In addition, students worked in classes with others who were encountering the challenges of beginning a new life in America and of being different. Smaller class sizes assisted in the one-on-one help students were seeking. Dhahdin presented a place where students could "fit in" with peers.

A second theme was ease. Students commented on the ease of the classes at Dhahdin compared with those in the mainstream environment. This may have been due to a level of instruction which facilitated learning. All classes at Dhahdin are taught with an ESL emphasis. Subject area classes taught in the mainstream environment may be

considerably more challenging than the same classes taught with an ESL focus. Students also felt it was easier to accumulate credits at Dhahdin. Dhahdin has both a day school and a night school program, and this appears to attract students who are interested in accumulating credits more quickly for graduation. For the older student, this time is crucial. In addition, there is an after school homework help center at Dhahdin for students who want additional help in any subject. This allows them small group or one-on-one time with native English-speaking volunteers.

There was a perception among those interviewed that Dhahdin requires students to earn fewer credits to graduate than other area high schools do. This perception arose from a misunderstanding of the variety of ways school districts measure credit accumulation. Dhahdin meets the required state standards, but Dhahdin uses a semester system while mainstream schools in the area use a trimester system. While in reality the requirements are the same for Dhahdin and other high schools, this perception of differing requirements remains.

Location is another kind of ease. Many students live close to the school, so they chose to attend Dhahdin. Ease for another student was the later start time Dhahdin offers. In addition to sleeping in, these time differences and the evening classes offered more options for students who work.

A final theme involved cultural factors. Interviewees felt that Dhahdin school was a place which allowed students to feel safe and comfortable within their own culture. Somali teachers and teachers who have lived or grown up abroad add to the international culture at Dhahdin. Interviewees felt at home at Dhahdin while they felt out of place at

mainstream schools. Tensions between the African-American and Somali communities have parents fearful about gang activity. As they are also afraid that their children will become “Americanized,” parents appreciated the traditional dress that many girls wear at Dhahdin and the time allowed for prayer during the school day.

An additional insight I gained from this study regards the parents I interviewed. Prior to the interviews, I had met very few parents/guardians. Few attend our parent/teacher conferences which had led me to believe that there was little interest on their part in their students’ school and education. To be fair, a number of our students do not have parents/guardians living in this area (for various reasons), and this partly accounts for low attendance figures at conferences. However, I came away from my seven parent interviews with the firm conviction that while the parents/guardians who are present may be timid about coming to school to find out how their students are doing, they really want to know and appreciate contact from staff and teachers.

Complications and Limitations of the Study

This study was affected by numerous complications and limitations. Language difficulty was a factor with some of the participants I interviewed. If I had been Somali and had been able to conduct the interviews in Somali rather than in English, I may have had different results. Besides being able to communicate more easily and more in depth in a first language, having the same background might have given me a more natural rapport with the interviewees. This study was also conducted with a small number of participants. A greater number of participants would have given a broader representation of people’s views and would have given more creditability to similar views. This study

just touched the surface of some of the challenges that face newcomers in this country. Each interview lasted from 15 to 25 minutes. A follow-up interview with each participant, a series of interviews, or focus groups might have provided more information about each family, information which might have proved helpful in the analysis.

Implications for Educators and Administrators

I have learned much through the writing of this paper and would like my readers to come away from this research with a clearer understanding of refugee students and particularly, the Somali community. Many cultural and background differences create a gap between mainstream America and Somali refugees. Some knowledge of Somali history and culture is imperative in bridging this gap to better integrate two different cultures. More importantly, the Somali community speaks for itself throughout this paper. The themes that emerged came directly from the people I spoke with. I believe the results of this research are especially important for mainstream schools which have both American-born students and Somali refugee student populations within one class.

It is also important to note the 1954 *Brown versus Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that revoked the legal basis for racial segregation in the public school system. A sheltered, separate, ESL school environment may raise questions about equal access to education, and assimilation into the mainstream culture. One new question may be, “Can acculturation emerge within the refugee community and mainstream America without complete assimilation?” Another may be, “Can immigrants and refugees receive a truly equal education within a mainstream setting in which they feel uncomfortable and unable to compete?” I acknowledge that I came to this paper with a clear bias in favor of

the sheltered, content-based environment as my four years of teaching experience has only been in this kind of environment. Yet, I cannot imagine placing even my advanced students in the same mainstream classroom as students who were born in America, expecting both groups to thrive. There are many effective ways to educate ESL students. The sheltered, content-based environment does not fit every student. However, I suggest that the sheltered, content-based environment fills a niche for the older high school student who has little or no chance of reaching grade level in the mainstream environment. This paper attempts to carefully examine one of those environments in order to understand why students are choosing this kind of school.

Suggestions for Further Research

The possibilities for further research are endless as I found there was little research in this area. Similar studies with different immigrant/refugee groups would show potential similarities and differences between cultural groups. A study on Somali teens who lack the presence of a father at home might offer further insights. Such a study on Somali teens may show a link to school choice. A consistent theme in this research was the tensions between African and African-American students. Research in this area might offer significant insights for mainstream schools. Studies that consider the success of sheltered students versus mainstream students after high school graduation would provide additional academic information about the two programs. Through what I learned in this research, I believe a study focusing on parents of high school age refugees, especially their challenges and expectations with their children and schools in America, is greatly needed. Finally, studies of age at entry to America, gender, prior education in

home country, and age at which the student entered school in America would all prove helpful, I believe, in understanding and improving the education of Somali students.

Summary

This project stretched me in a number of ways. My communication skills were sharpened, and early in the project I realized the need for “many other hands” in the process for it to be completed. It was a process that was a mixture of wonder, frustration, and admiration. It is my hope that the data I have presented and the conclusions I have drawn will offer insights to others who work closely with the Somali people; it is a place for future research to begin.

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

Interview Questions – for Students

Family Background – Tell me about your family...

1. Where were you born?
2. When did you come to America?
3. Do you live with any family members here?
4. What does a high school education mean to you? to your family?

Educational Background

1. Did you have any formal education in Somalia/Kenya?
2. How old were you when you began school?
3. What subjects were you taught in that school?

America – first school

1. How old were you when you came to America?
2. Tell me about your first school in America. ESL classes?
3. Did you become friends with American born students? Why or why not?
4. What were some positives and negatives of this school?
5. How long were you at this school?
6. Why did you change schools?

Dhahdin Charter School Questions

1. When did you come to this school?
2. How did you hear about it?
3. How do these classes compare with previous schools' classes?
4. Tell me about the positives and negatives of this school.

Interview Questions – for Parents

Personal

1. How long have you been in America?
2. Where have you lived prior to coming to America?
3. Traditionally, (in your culture) what is the parents' role in the education of children?
4. What are some differences you have observed between education in Somalia/Kenya and education in America?

Questions regarding student

1. Had your student attended school in Somalia/Kenya before? What kind of school and for how long?
2. How old was your student when he/she started school in America?
3. How many schools has your student attended in America?
4. Is this school much different from other schools your student has attended? Why or why not?
5. Why have you chosen this school over other schools?
6. Does this school offer something for you/your student that other schools haven't? What?
7. What does this school lack that your student needs? What else can we do to help your student? You, as a parent?

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