

From Mainstream to East African Charter:
East African Muslim Students' Experiences in U.S. Schools

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Dedication

For Rick, Azaya and Zada

Abstract

It is in schools where immigrant and refugee youth most directly encounter the dominant and competing cultures of their new society. As youth interface with these cultures, schools become central places for youth to explore the meaning of their own identity and who they are in relation to others. In this study, I explore how East African Muslim immigrant youth experience and become shaped by the environments of U.S. mainstream schools as compared to a charter high school designed by an East African community and intended specifically for East African students.

Describing their former experiences in mainstream schools through a lens that is altered by their current experiences attending the charter school, these youth present a failing relationship between mainstream schools and East African Muslim immigrant students. Students report feeling invisible and unwelcome in mainstream schools, experiencing academic discrimination, religious and cultural hostility, and racism. As a response to these difficult experiences and in an effort to maintain their religious and cultural identity, immigrant communities have begun to create specialized schools, like the culturally specific charter school central to this study, which better accommodate their culture, religion, language, and history.

At the East African charter school, youth reported no longer feeling marginalized. The once-overwhelming process of trying to “fit in” and “belong” with either dominant society or their home community was ameliorated. Youth became empowered to resist, contest, and/or embrace the dominant and competing cultures of their host society. While not all participants experienced the same degree of academic success or complete satisfaction with the learning milieu of the charter school, ultimately the school

environment promoted a positive learning environment where students' academic and social identities were positively affected. For some participants, the school experience also appeared to repair previously damaged student identities—damage that occurred from prior mainstream school experiences.

Results from this study highlight how East African Muslim immigrant youth are affected by academic, racial, cultural and religious discrimination in schools and reveal how differing school contexts serve to affect the overall school experience and identity construction of these youth. Implications are discussed for how schools can decrease the barriers these students face in schools and demonstrate inclusive and necessary ways to accommodate and respect the academic, racial, cultural and religious identity of East African Muslim immigrant youth.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“They come from a war and now they are facing a new war,” said a Somali elder about Somali youths’ experiences in British schools (Arthur, 2004, p. 225). Sadly, most of the studies of Somali immigrant youth and other Muslim immigrant youth in western schools support this claim. Jasmin Zine (2000) calls schools in Canada alienating and says Muslim adolescents are confused and dissonant. Kaye Haw (1998) describes British schools as large, unfriendly, and intimidating and finds Muslim students segregated and silent. Merry (2005) portrays schools in Belgium to be excluding its Muslim youth and finds these youth ostracized and discriminated against, while Sarroub (2002) paints the picture of Yemeni immigrants in the United States as depressed, desperate, and living in ambiguity. Gilbert (2004) summarizes these perspectives about the failing relationship between western schools and Muslim students by stating that “schools and teachers maintain a powerful prejudicial discourse, immersed in unequal power relationships, where [Muslim] students are, at best, misunderstood, and, at worst, deliberately discriminated against” (p. 253). What lies behind this distressing and shameful consensus?

A place to start answering this important question surrounds the nature of how Muslim youth find themselves in direct conflict with the dominant status quo culture within western society and schools. While rapidly changing student demographics have challenged the relevance and efficacy of long standing administrative, curricular, instructional and evaluative practices, many of which were developed for monocultural, homogeneous nation-states (Luke, 1995), schools in the West continue to be

predominantly oriented toward students who are White and Christian (Ajrouch, 2004; Gilbert, 2004). Based on western values, western schools expect that all students be treated equally,¹ that all children should be given the same mainstream curricula, and that all students should behave and respond to schools' practices in the same way—regardless of culture, religion or gender (Ajrouch, 2004; Gilbert, 2004). In this way, schools become key sites for the production of culture and reproduction in American society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997)—a place where White, Christian dominant cultures and values are transmitted, and where the freedom to express and practice a non-dominant religion, like Islam, is resisted (Ajrouch, 2004; Gilbert, 2004; Haw, 1998).

Many Muslim immigrant groups locate their primary identities in their religion (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2002; Collet, 2007; Merry, 2005; Berns McGown, 1999; Shah, 2006). While understanding that Muslim youth practice Islam to varying degrees, religious traditions are often strongly reinforced by the parents in the home, and youth are often raised to practice Islam as a *comprehensive way of life* (Zine, 2000). By practicing an Islamic faith-centered lifestyle, certain practices are expected, for example adhering to religious dress (for girls), prayer time, and fasting during Ramadan.² In their desire to live the “straight path” in accordance to the literal rules of the Qur’an, Muslim youth are often portrayed in the literature as conflicted about the social norms and culture of schools in the west (Ajrouch, 2004; Gilbert, 2004; Haw, 1998; Merry, 2005; Zine, 2000, 2001, 2006, 2007). As will be revealed in Chapter 2, Muslim youth— East African or

¹ Haw (1998, p. 97) states that the principle of equality is not necessarily satisfied by identical treatment. Citing Durkee (1990, p. 12) Haw explains, “In Islam the notion of equality has a spiritual basis: Islam proclaims the absolute equality of men and women in terms of the “soul, moral nature, spiritual rights and potential, but this is not held to be inconsistent with the recognition of physical, emotional or social differences.”

² During the month of Ramadan, otherwise known as *Sawm*, Muslims are to fast from dawn to dusk, express their gratitude and nearness to God, be mindful of their sins, and think of the needy.

not, first generation or second, in the U.S. or elsewhere in the West—have been found to be in a precarious position, where conforming to Muslim cultural values constitutes a deviation from dominant cultural norms in the West, yet conforming to dominant cultural norms challenges eastern cultural values. Surrounded by religious discrimination and ignorance, and struggling to deal with the perceptions of their peers, teachers, family, community and dominant society, as well as their own perceptions of themselves, Muslim youth often feel forced to compromise their Islamic values when confronted daily by the pressures to assimilate to western cultural norms and expectations. These norms and expectations that play out in dominant societal discourses at work in mainstream schools often leave Muslim youth feeling misunderstood and marginalized. As a result, school adjustment continues to be one of the greatest challenges for Muslim youth.

In this dissertation study, I examine how one group of adolescent East African Muslim immigrant youth experience and are shaped by two different kinds of school contexts in the United States, that of: a.) regular mainstream public schools (here after referred to simply as “mainstream schools”) and, b.) an East African charter high school. The study is situated within the broader theoretical discourse on the education of immigrant youth. First, by investigating students’ experiences in mainstream schools, this study draws upon assimilation theory, making the argument that mainstream schools in the U.S. are key sites where assimilation into the dominant culture is promoted and where it is assumed that we will all become “the same” (Alba & Nee, 2003). The participants of my study paint a picture of U.S. mainstream schools as places where in order to succeed academically and socially one must fully learn to assimilate to western

popular culture—or in their words, “become Americanized.” To become Americanized, a process that American schools have long been held responsible for (Olneck, 2004), immigrant youth must take part in a “subtractive assimilation” process (Cummins, 1986; Gibson 1993; Valenzuela, 1999). Due to a lack of reinforcement in schools, immigrant youth must give up their native language skills for an English-only curriculum and rid themselves of their native cultural identity in order conform to American culture (i.e., American fashion and lifestyle).

Assimilation as a form of adaptation to one’s host country has long been under critique by scholars who claim that the approach is not only ethnocentric and unsuccessful, but also produces economic and racial inequality (Gibson, 1988; Lee, 2005; Ogbu, 1991, 2001; Olsen, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001; C. Suarez-Orozco & M. Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Additionally, assimilation theories are critiqued (see Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou & Bankston, 2001) for not being able to capture the experience of a more culturally, racially, economically—and I would add—religiously diverse post-1965 immigrant population, such as the Black Muslim immigrant population central to this study. Finally, assimilation literature does not address the effects of caring and the role of school-based relationships (Valenzuela, 1999), an argument that underpins my explanation of the problematic experiences my participants face in mainstream schools. Nevertheless, with all of these arguments at hand, mainstream schools continue to be key sites for the practice of assimilation.

Educators in U.S. mainstream schools might respond to accusations that their schools are institutions that promote assimilation by saying that more accommodations and multicultural efforts are being made for immigrant youth like the East African

Muslim youth of this study. Indeed, some schools are attending to the practical cultural concerns of their Muslim student population, such as modifying clothing requirements for girls (especially in physical education), allowing for prayer, curbing art and song requirements, and by recognizing “diversity” through multicultural events throughout the school year. While these efforts should be considered as a start in a positive direction, schools’ efforts at providing Muslim youth with a truly inclusive school environment often remain superficial in nature (Ajrouch, 2004; Haw, 1998; Sarroub, 2002). Versions of multicultural education or school events like “diversity day” often run the risk of reifying culturally held stereotypes and marginalizing minority students as “other” (Banks, 1993; Delpit, 1995). For example, in a study of Somali adolescent immigrants in a Finnish school, Alitoppa-Niitamo (2002) found that students’ self-image and sense of pride were negatively affected by the exclusion of their culture in the school curricula. Additionally, students were overwhelmed by not having the required cultural background knowledge needed to be successful in classes or national exams. Due to these monocultural and excluding school practices, these youth developed apathetic and dissonant attitudes toward their education and increasingly missed school.

Along with only a handful of other studies that have focused on Black Muslim immigrant youth, Alitoppa-Niitamo’s research reveals an especially vulnerable immigrant population that faces even more difficult circumstances than Asian or Latino immigrants. While many immigrant populations are subjected to xenophobia (discrimination toward foreigners), due to the color of their skin, Black Muslim immigrants also face racism (Forman, 2002; Kusow, 2006; Ibrahim, 1999), and religious discrimination in the form of Islamophobia (Berns McGown, 1999; De Voe, 2002; Gilbert, 2004; Kubota & Lin, 2006;

Merry, 2005; Vayas, 2004). These experiences of oppression can lead to feelings of pessimism that help shape students' views about school (Forman, 2002; Gilbert, 2004; Merry, 2005; Shah, 2006). As a form of coping, some youth lose faith in the existing school system (Suarez-Orozco, 2004) and construct an adversarial or oppositional identity to resist the unequal school practices and inferior educational institutions they witness firsthand (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 2003). Developing an oppositional identity involves rejecting education as a means of attaining social mobility (Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Ogbu, 1987), seeking a deviant means for empowerment that often leads to participation in negative or dangerous behavior such as delinquency, truancy, gang involvement, alcohol/drug abuse, and disinterest in furthering their education (Lee, 2005; McBrien, 2005; Um, 2003). As will be revealed by some of the participants of this study, in order to distance oneself from the dominant culture or find another means for empowerment, some youth develop an oppositional identity that reflects other minority cultures—such as Hip Hop culture (Asher, 2008). This kind of identity change can result not only in resistance from one's own community, but also from the community the immigrant youth seek to emulate.

As a response to the academic discrimination, religious and cultural hostility, and racism experienced by Muslim youth in schools and in an effort to maintain one's religious and ethnic identity, Muslim immigrant communities have begun to create specialized schools (i.e., private Islamic or “culturally specific”³ charter schools) that give attention to youths' culture, religion, language, and history (Azmi, 2001; Collet;

³ I borrow the term “culturally specific” from Nathaniel Popper's Wall Street Week article exploring charter schools that target specific ethnic populations (“Chartering a New Course,” August 31, 2007). Other terms found in the literature include “religiously supportive,” “religiously sensitive,” and “culturally oriented” (Weinberg, 2007).

2007; Haw, 1994; Zine, 2007). The second school context of this study is a charter high school created by an East African community with the specific intentions of serving East African Muslim youth. While examining students' experiences at this East African charter school, I draw from the work of Portes and Rumbaut (1996, 2001) and their theory of selective acculturation, revealing how students in this culturally-oriented charter school context are not only better able to maintain their culture, religion, language, and relationships with parents/community, but also slow down the often rapid process of Americanization. With this form of acculturation, immigrant communities are able to adopt certain skills from the host society they deem as traits worth having, while also tapping into the social capital of their native culture, language, religion and ties to one's ethnic community—all of which has been found to promote upward social mobility and a more successful adaptation (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001; Qin, 2006; Zhou, 2004).

Connecting the literature on immigrant adjustment to an understudied immigrant population, this dissertation study aims to broaden our understanding of how Black Muslim immigrant students experience school in the U.S. and how these youth negotiate the various cultural norms and expectations in schools while constructing their identities. Specifically, I consider how East African Muslim immigrant adolescents negotiate the processes of academic, cultural, religious, and racial identity formation as they experience two different kinds of U.S. school contexts. To do so, I ask the following questions: a.) What stories do East African students tell about their previous experiences in mainstream schools as compared to their current experiences at an East African charter

high school? and b.) How are East African students' social and academic identities constructed and co-constructed in these school settings?

In this study, I look at the *multiple* forces at work in schools and consider how schooling shapes educational success, identity formation and opportunity structures. On one hand, I investigate some of the structural influences at work in schools, such as tracking or class size, and consider how students and teachers respond to those influences. On the other hand, I look at the role of dominant culture in schools and how that culture serves to direct and reinforce identity formation, actions and decision-making. By looking at the multiple forces at work in schools, I am better able to describe how students' academic, cultural, religious and racial backgrounds as well as their interactions with teachers and peers play important roles in shaping their achievement, adjustment and identity.

In this study, I will: a.) present a more global portrait of Black Muslim immigrant students' experiences in schools so that we may better understand the overwhelming challenges these youth face on many different fronts, and b.) expose the relationship of schooling to the on-going process of identity formation. By doing so, I will contribute to an understudied area of scholarly work that investigates the ways Black Muslim immigrant youth experience schools within the U.S., and reveal the important roles that culture, religion and race play in determining the academic success and identity formation of immigrant youth.

Chapter II: Review of Related Literature

This literature review will serve to inform the reader of what is known, as well as what needs to be learned, about: a.) East African Muslim immigrant students' experiences in and reactions to mainstream schools, and b.) their experience of attending alternative school options, like the culturally specific charter school central to this study. Finally, I will present the purpose of my study and how this literature review has informed my investigation of my participants' experiences in and reactions to both mainstream and charter school contexts.

In the first part of this review, I will explore the social and academic experiences of immigrant adolescents in mainstream schools, and how students' identities are affected by these experiences in mainstream schools. My primary focus is to understand the experiences and the impact of those experiences on the identities of *East African Muslim* immigrants—primarily Somalis—in *U.S. mainstream* schools. However, I have expanded this review because there are few studies specifically looking at how East African Muslim youth experience schools (Berns McGown, 1999). Because it is argued that most East African immigrants primarily identify themselves as Muslims (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2002; Collet, 2007), I have expanded my review to include studies that focus on groups of Muslim immigrant youth from other parts of the world, such as the Middle East and South Asia. Because East African immigrants are a racialized⁴ population in the West (Berns McGown, 1999; Bigelow, 2008; Forman, 2002; Ibrahim, 1999; Kusow, 2006; Zine, 2000), and because understanding this racialization is key to understanding

⁴ Racialization is a socially constructed process where the color of one's skin becomes the predominant way of being identified by others and/or identifying oneself.

these immigrant youth, I have also included studies that have focused on other Black immigrant youth. Because there have been few U.S. studies focusing on Somali, Muslim, or Black immigrant adolescent students' experiences (Berns McGown, 1999; Vayas, 2004; Waters, 1994), I have included findings from important studies conducted in other countries around the world. Finally, because the focus of my dissertation research is to capture the voices of East African adolescents who were not born in the U.S. but who arrived to the country at a young age, I have primarily focused on research that relies on or includes the perspectives of first-generation immigrant adolescents.⁵

In the second part of this review, I will describe what is known about alternative schooling options, such as religious private schools and different forms of school choice options (i.e., voucher programs, magnet schools, and charter schools). I will specifically investigate the growing phenomenon of culturally specific charter schools as a response to some parents' and community's dissatisfaction with mainstream schools. Because few studies have been conducted about the experiences of students in culturally specific charter schools, this part of the literature review will focus more on informing the reader about both the facts and the controversy that surrounds school choice options like charter schools. Additionally, I will make a case for how my study serves to fill a void in the existing research on culturally specific charter schools.

⁵ First generation immigrant status is defined differently in the literature. In this study, first generation immigrant youth are youth not born in the U.S. I will explicitly inform the reader when I am talking about second generation youth, defined in this study as the U.S.-born children of first generation immigrant parents.

Mainstream School Experiences

*We don't want to be seen as terrorists. We don't want people being scared of us for who we are, for where we came from, for what our religion is. But if you're wearing this (points to her hijab⁶), there's a lot more you have to deal with than if you take it off. If you just take it off, who's gonna know you're a Muslim? Who's gonna know you're a Somali? You know?
Nusaybah⁷ (Somali-American, female, junior)*

Since the 1980's an increasing number of East African Muslim immigrants have resettled in the United States. This migration was largely caused by the Somali civil war that displaced hundreds of thousands of Somali citizens to neighboring countries and refugee camps. Due to the presence of organized refugee services and employment opportunities, the state where this study takes place has the largest Somali population (roughly 40,000⁸) in the United States. As the quote above by one of my student participants illustrates, the most difficult aspect of this resettlement for East African Muslim families is following Islam in a predominantly Judeo-Christian society (Berns McGown, 1999, p. 101). For Muslim adolescent newcomers, as will be revealed in this study, the tensions are particularly acute because their family and community often espouse beliefs that are in direct conflict with the U.S. adolescent cultures of, for example, dating, entertainment and dress. Schools are the key sites of this tension and often a place of rapid assimilation (Olneck, 2003) as opposed to a more culturally thoughtful adaptation process (Bhatia & Ram, 2004; Gibson, 1988).

Race and religion are distinguishing features that affect the school experiences and identity negotiation of East African Muslim immigrant youth in U.S. mainstream

⁶ *Hijab* primarily refers to women's head and body covering, but in Islamic scholarship, *hijab* is given the wider meaning of modesty, privacy, and morality (Esposito, 2003).

⁷ All names (cities, schools, students and staff) used in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

⁸ The size of refugee communities is notoriously difficult to measure due to inaccurate census data gathered in apartment buildings with occupancy limits as well as changing immigration policies and fluctuating secondary immigration patterns.

schools and society. Therefore, in the first part of this review, I will focus specifically on issues of race and religion over other issues more commonly shared by other immigrant populations, such as the challenge of learning English and other academic issues.

Race

How immigrant youth are treated racially has a pervasive influence on their understanding of their own identity, and inevitably affects their interactions with the dominant society. Interestingly, two of the most significant and extensive studies conducted on Muslim immigrant youth omit the very real experience of Muslim youth being racialized in schools and in society. Kay Haw's (1998) four-year comparative study of Pakistani immigrant youth in two English schools focused on issues of gender, Islam, and single-sex schooling; Louisa Sarroub's (2005) two-year ethnography of Yemeni-American youth in Dearborn, Michigan focused on the social, cultural, and religious influences that impact the identity-making experiences of Muslim girls. While these studies have contributed much to the field (and will be further discussed throughout this literature review), they missed a valuable opportunity to discuss the effects of race on identity.

To understand the effects of race on identity, race must be looked at beyond physiological differences and toward the understanding of race as a situated, socially constructed response to sociocultural, political, and historical conditions at a given point in time (Kubota & Lin, 2006). It is with this view, that I will discuss how issues of racialization affect Black immigrants, through the lens of "becoming Black" (Ibrahim,

1999), and Black and non-Black Muslims, through the lens of “Islamophobia” (van Driel, 2004).

Identifying as...? In addition to the normal challenges of adolescence, Black immigrant youth must face a disorienting discovery that they are marginalized and socially constructed as “other” due to the color of their skin. While East African immigrant youth may be initially conscious of the academic and linguistic gaps between themselves and their more literate peers, they soon become aware of a social gap as well, when they become aware that they are the focus of negative racial stereotypes from peers and from teachers. First generation Black immigrants are often inclined to distance themselves from African Americans in order to separate themselves from the racial stigmatization and negative stereotypes that are connected to African Americans (Rong & Fitchett, 2008; Vickerman, 1999). Yet Black immigrants inevitably experience racialization, where simply due to the color of their skin their actions come under scrutiny and they face bigoted assumptions about their education and economic status (Bryce-Laporte, 1972). Schools are key sites where racialization takes place.

The construction of one’s identity does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, identity is co-constructed and shaped within social relationships (Hall, 1996), where others identify us and we simultaneously draw on these identifications to make meaning for ourselves (Ngo, 2008). As Black immigrant youth come to face racialization, informal racist social practices, as well as institutional racism in U.S. society, many come to internalize the many discourses that identify them. The debate surrounding “choosing one’s identity”—between identifying primarily with one’s ethnicity or with one’s color of skin—is discussed in the literature in different ways.

Maintaining ethnic identity. Consider the following quote, taken from Abdi Kusow's (2006, p. 546) research with Somali immigrants:

“I consider myself as Somali, and I don't consider myself as Black, White, Chinese or Indian. I consider myself as Somali and only Somali—that is my race.”

This statement highlights that for many Black immigrants racial identity is synonymous with ethnic or national identity. In Somalia, as in some other nations, people do not define themselves as “Black,” nor are they familiar with cultural codes of race (Forman, 2002; Kusow, 2006). Yet these immigrants soon come to discover that by crossing the borders of continents, they are also moving from one set of social classification systems to another and “becoming Black” (Ibrahim, 1999).

But some research shows that Black immigrant adolescents are maintaining their national, ethnic, and/or religious identities despite external societal pressures that expect them to assimilate racially. Rima Berns McGown (1999) interviewed over 80 Somali men, women, and youth in London and Toronto and found that while most of her participants were in the process of a gradual accommodation to the West, Somalis in both countries were actually creating a stronger identification with Islam and ‘Muslimness.’ McGown stressed that a hostile or harmonious integration process, depending on the political culture and reception of their host country, was a factor that likely affected one's national, ethnic or religious identification. While the study is an important contribution that focuses on a rarely-studied immigrant population, McGown leaned toward viewing her Somali participants as a homogeneous group—failing to discuss how tribal, regional, and class differences might affect her findings.

McGown (1999) found the Somali communities of London and Toronto to be united as a community. Research has shown that when first and second generation immigrants have access to strong co-ethnic communities and social capital they are more likely to maintain ethnic identity as their primary identity (Bigelow, 2006; Schmid, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Margaret Gibson's (1988) study of Punjabi youth in U.S. schools is a good example of how youth are positively influenced by their community so they are able to accommodate certain cultural demands of their host country, yet not adopt entirely to the values and aspects of the culture that would serve to dismantle their identity as Punjabis and Sikhs. Herrera (2003) found that Moroccan Muslim youth in Spain also advocated a similar strategy of accommodation without complete assimilation, utilizing the coethnic support around them to do so.

Interestingly, immigrants that do identify with their ethnicity over race tended to perform better academically in school (Qin-Hillard, 2003; Waters, 1994). In a five-year longitudinal study measuring 411 first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants students' attitudes toward school, Desiree Baolian Qin-Hillard (2003) found a positive correlation between the maintenance of ethnic identity and positive attitudes toward school. She found that boys were especially at risk for becoming less engaged in schools. Without the sources of social capital that girls were more likely to have in school and at home (i.e., more monitoring from home, better relationships with teachers, friendships that are more supportive of academics, and less exposure to prevalent culture), boys were more vulnerable to the urban vices (gang-culture, drugs, alcohol, etc.) that often surrounded them both inside and outside of schools. Due to such influences, boys were more at risk for developing an adversarial or oppositional identity toward school.

John Ogbu's (1987) theoretical framework that distinguishes voluntary and involuntary minorities is also useful in understanding the phenomenon of developing an oppositional identity toward school. A voluntary migrant migrates to a new country with the belief that they will have greater economic well being ("folk theory of success"), seeing discrimination by host society as something they will overcome as they learn the language and overcome cultural barriers. Involuntary minorities, such as Black Americans or American Indians, were brought to the host society involuntarily and have developed an oppositional identity to that of the dominant group after having been subjected to discrimination and subordination by host society. Ogbu's theory is helpful in understanding what lies behind many first generation Muslim immigrants' views that formal education is the result of hard work and is instrumental in the strategy of upward mobility—something that Herrera (2003) found in his study of Moroccan youth in Spain and Merry (2005) found in his study of Turkish and Moroccan youth in Belgium.

But Ogbu's folk theory of success does not allow for the systematic barriers that can get in the way of immigrant youth. In school, these barriers might include things like teachers' low expectations, ethnocentric curriculum, lack of diversity in staff, etc. Outside of school, Zhou (2003) draws our attention to negative effects that the conditions of inner-city neighborhoods have on youth. Exposure to ghetto cultures, materialistic mainstream culture through television, poor living conditions, unsafe streets, economic distress and inadequate schooling conditions may lead some first generation immigrant youth to turn to an adversarial youth subculture and adopt an attitude that includes willful refusal of mainstream norms and values.

More specifically, Ogbu's theory does not include an analysis of how Black, Muslim refugees like the participants in my study fit in his framework. He fails to address what happens when racist and sexist stereotypes affect Muslim or Black immigrants' abilities to be successful in schools. Some first generation East African youth may resemble involuntary minorities due to racist and/or Islamophobic attitudes by host society.

"Becoming Black." For example, Awad E Karim M. Ibrahim (1999) describes the impact of "becoming Black" on Black Franco-Ontarian immigrant youth (immigrants originally from Somalia, Djibouti, Senegal, etc.). Ibrahim explains how Black immigrant youth in racially conscious western societies are expected "to be Black, act Black, and so be the marginalized Other" (p. 353) in order to racially fit somewhere. Thus, in what Ibrahim calls "moments of identification," some African immigrant youth take up rap and hip-hop and speak Black Standardized English—choices that are determined largely by the social conditions under which these youth live.

Several other studies have also shown that Black immigrant youth come to identify and adapt to the cultural codes of Black youth culture, often as a response to the inequities and judgments they come to experience in White, dominant society (Forman, 2002; Rong & Fitchett, 2008; Waters, 1994). Tekle M. Woldemikael (1989) argues in his study of Haitian immigrants in Illinois, that skin color, more than anything else, determines the reactions of others to Black immigrants. Over time, as youth experience ignorant acts such as racist epithets and racial profiling, Black immigrants come to adopt the racial solidarity of their Afro-American peers, as documented by this youth's analysis of his place in society:

My destiny hinges with society. The problems faced by Afro-Americans are the same problems I face... I am Black. I may have Haitian background, but I am Black. After all, is there really a Haitian culture? (Woldemikael, 1989, p. 113)

This statement aligns with Ibrahim's perspective that "one invests where one sees oneself mirrored" (1999, p. 365). Recognizing that they are treated in similarly discriminatory ways as African American youth, and realizing that school will not necessarily lead to social mobility and economic advancement, some Black immigrant youth—especially those from working-class backgrounds, develop oppositional views toward school. Peer pressure leads some youth to avoid acting White and to take on aspects of an adversarial youth subculture that results in lowered motivation toward school, a weakened work ethic, a lack of control by parents, and a cultural disconnect between youth and parents/community (Rong & Brown, 2002; Waters, 1994). Over time, adversarial youth subculture leads to higher high school dropout rates and academic and behavior problems (Zhou, 2003)—especially profound for third and fourth generation Black immigrant youth (Rong & Fitchett, 2008). With this phenomenon in mind, a question I carried into my study was the following: As East African immigrant youth come to spend more years in this country than they did in their native country, as they come to lose their accents, and as they come to be lumped by dominant society into the simple category of "Black," will they too choose to identify as Black/African American over East African?

Somewhere in-between. Perhaps the answer to that question is that the choice of being East African or Black is not a simple one. Perhaps instead these youth will locate themselves somewhere in between these choices. In attempts to understand the complex negotiation of race, culture and identity, I have reviewed several large studies employing ethnographic methods that offer insights into the fluid and slippery nature of the identity-

making process of immigrant youth. Daniel Yon (2000) discovers an “elusive culture” amongst the culturally and racially diverse students in an inner-city high school in Toronto, Canada. For example, Heinz, from Switzerland, refuses to relate to the “immigrant” label because he sees immigrants as non-White and visible (p. 53). Marta, a student from Serbia, identifies more with being “Spanish” because the clothing and music that Latinos prefer are both in the “in category” to her (p. 54). Another student originally from Ethiopia refuses to identify with being Ethiopian, “because I have left Ethiopia behind,” or with being Black, “because Black is just a color” (p. 55).

From these identifications we can observe how youth can resist an understanding of race or culture as something they are required to embody; rather, they can engage in a multiplicity of identities. Similarly, using a conceptual lens of the *in-between* (a term coined by Bhabha, 1994), Bic Ngo’s (2004) study of Laotian youth in an interracial, urban public school shows the “messiness” and conflicting nature of identity work. While dominant discourse racializes Asian American students as effeminate (Kumashiro, 1999) or quiet (Lei, 2003) or the model minority (Lee, 1996), the Lao American students unsettle these classifications by aligning themselves with the clothes, music, and attitudes of African American men (Ngo, 2006, p. 19). By creating an *in-between* identity, these students unsettle the traditional boundaries of what it means to be African American or Asian American.

While research that focuses on East African adolescents is minimal, some studies have found that these youth, like other Black immigrant youth, have come to employ multiple, competing, and shifting identities (Bigelow, 2008; Forman, 2002; Ibrahim, 1999). Music (such as rap and hip-hop), language and gestures of non-immigrant Black

peers have become influential for some East African youth in resisting prejudice and in redefining their racialized identities within schools and society. Yet while some East African youth are in some ways “becoming Black,” these adolescents face pressure by their parents and community to maintain their culture, language, and, especially, religion (Bigelow, 2008). Amid two often opposing worlds with which to identify, Forman (2002) finds that Somali youth are destined to “suffer.” Forman states (pp.100-101):

These [Somali] teens often stake out deliberately rebellious positions in which Hip Hop is strategically influential, though in doing so they are signaling to their peers that they are “cool,” unafraid of possible repercussions, and willing to test the system for flaws or weaknesses. Despite their worldly and often tragic experiences, however, most Somali youths generally lack the knowledge, savvy, or “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1984) that is valued among their North American teen peers. Many of these recent immigrants are thus destined to suffer from a dual deficit, in the first instance due to their perceived inability to cope in the standard school curriculum in the eyes of adult authorities, and in the second instance, due to their lack of innate hipness in the eyes of their classmates.

In this passage, we can see that these youth find themselves in a vulnerable position. They are not able to fully fit in with their North American peers, nor be accepted by their teachers—facing what Forman (2002, p. 100) calls a “dual deficit” or becoming what Yon (2000, p. 78) calls “doubly marked” in schools.

Murray Forman’s (2002) conclusions align, in part, with those of Waters (1994) who found that Black immigrant youth who identified with Black Americans did less well in school. While I believe that Forman’s study helps us understand the difficult and conflicting experiences Somali youth face in schools, I question some of his other assertions. Comparing Somali adolescents’ experiences in a U.S. school versus a Canadian school, Forman claims that because the U.S. school provides bilingual education to its Somali youth, “the result is an extended and deepened marginality within school society and the Somali youths are, compared with the Canadian school context,

more slowly integrated into school activities” (p. 113). I question this finding for a variety of reasons. First, because Forman is comparing two very different school contexts (where in one school the Somalis account for a small percentage of the students and in the other school as much as half), there may be other reasons for the “deepened marginality” observed in one school’s Somali youth (reasons that deal with social capital, coethnic community, Somali teaching staff, etc.). Second, research has proven that literacy is best learned if developed first in the native language (Cummins, 1991; Collier, 1995; Thomas and Collier, 2000). Evidence suggests that when a students’ native language (L1) is used in classrooms, such as in a good quality bilingual program, students have access not only to acquiring English language skills at a faster pace, but also have access to valuable content they might not have had in an English-only learning environment (Lucas, 1992; Minnicucci & Olsen, 1991). Furthermore, students have the opportunity to feel their native language and cultural heritage is being valued. McKay points out that when programs strive to maintain students’ native languages, it results in “fewer drop-outs, less grade retention, fewer drug problems, and improved academic performance” (1988, p. 359).

Nevertheless, racial tensions do exist—not only between these immigrant youth and White, dominant culture, but also between Black immigrant youth and their non-immigrant Black peers (Waters, 1994; Woldemikael, 1989). Additionally, as these youth become more westernized, learn more English, and become more proficient at negotiating the institutional environment of their schools, they can also begin to drift away from Islam (a once stabilizing force in their lives), producing a generational dissonance between themselves and their parents and community (Bigelow, 2008;

Forman, 2002). When immigrant youth face unreceptive home and educational environments, these students may not only stop attending school, but might also turn to peer association for support and protection which, depending on the circumstances, can lead to problematic behavior that can result in further destruction of family and community relationships and delinquency (Lee, 2005; Um, 2003).

In this section, I have highlighted how race is a critical component to understanding the schooling experiences of Black immigrant youth. No matter how these youth define themselves ethnically, they cannot escape racial tensions in schools or society. In the next section I will describe how Muslim immigrant youth, even those who are not Black, experience discrimination due to their religion and culture. I expand my literature review to include studies on non-Black Muslim youth to highlight the prejudice youth face simply for being a Muslim in current socio-political times. The investigation of discrimination due to religious orientation is missing in several of the large studies surrounding East African immigrants. In fact, religion has been ignored in most discussions about institutional racism (Gilbert, 2004). The following section specifically focuses on religious discrimination that Muslim immigrant youth experience in schools.

Islamophobia

As mentioned earlier, by practicing an Islamic faith-centered lifestyle, youth in many ways are already socially excluded from non-Muslim youth. In a post-September 11 era, when Islam is presented in the media as a faith imposing terrorism (Vayas, 2004), negative stereotypes and Islamophobia beget even greater isolation and segregation for Muslim adolescents. Islamophobia, defined by van Driel (2004, p.x) as “an irrational

fear, distrust or rejection of the Muslim religion and those who are (perceived as) Muslim, is not a recent phenomenon (Kubota & Lin, 2006), but has certainly heightened in its intensity since the events of September 11th and other global terrorist attacks. Forced to carry the burden of representing stereotyped and stigmatized cultures, it is not surprising that these adolescents are perceived as far removed culturally in comparison to other immigrant students. Sapna Vyas (2004) reveals this burden in her study on the psychological impact of the September 11th terrorist attacks on Muslim high school students' processes of forming identities in the U.S. She found that Muslim adolescents were frequently subjected to cultural and religious slurs, were fearful for the safety of themselves and those they love, and were made to feel that they are not considered American. Such sentiments are captured by a Pakistani immigrant's description of how stereotypes affect him. He shared:

First, they look at my skin color. They don't say anything, but I know what they are thinking... oh, he's Muslim, and oh, he's a terrorist. The first thing that comes to their mind is "terrorist" because a lot of Muslims are against the United States. (Vyas, 2004, p. 227)

Racialization as Muslims. The above statement is a good example of how Muslim youth, Black or not, are subjected not only to discrimination based on religion, but also racialization based on "Muslim" phenotypical traits. Other studies also capture student perceptions of being racialized specifically as Muslims in schools (Archer, 2002; Gilbert, 2004; Herrera, 2003; Kubota & Lin, 2006; Zine 2001). In a study of mostly Lebanese American female adolescents in Dearborn, Michigan, Kristine Ajrouch (2004) found that even second generation youth who do not wear the *hijab* and check "White" on their census papers continue to see themselves as racialized and view the U.S. as a fundamentally pluralistic country, not a "melting pot" where cultures easily blend. Her

participants, having been born and raised in the U.S., perceive “White” girls as “American,” and themselves as, “other.” This study highlights for me the back and forth, ever shifting process of identity making. At times defining themselves as one label, at other times defining themselves as who they are not, and yet at other times feeling defined by dominant society, we can observe how influential race and religion is in the identity-formation of these Lebanese-American youth.

The hijab. While Ajrouch’s (2004) study points out that racialization occurs to even second generation, non-*hijab*-wearing youth, Muslim immigrant girls who do wear the *hijab*, or scarf, have been found to experience even more social and integrative problems (De Voe, 2002; Zine, 2006). To non-Muslims, the *hijab* may visually represent backwardness, terrorism, and oppression (Haw, 1998) and thereby leaves girls vulnerable to Islamophobia. Studying the integration of Somali youth in St. Louis, Missouri, Pamela De Voe found that by wearing the *hijab*, girls were more noticeable and restricted and thereby drew hostile reactions from non-Muslim peers. De Voe’s analysis reveals her frustration with Somali parents and the community, stating (p. 243), “For the Somali community the social integration of their girls is not important; following religiously prescribed and gender-based behaviors take precedence” (p. 243). But by blaming the girls’ isolation solely on the cultural and religious practices, like that of wearing the *hijab*, she misses opportunities to discuss other factors that impact their segregation in schools, such as feeling racialized and discriminated against by peers and teachers. Her conclusion that youth wear the *hijab* only because they are “pressured by their families,” does not consider the girls’ autonomy in deciding to wear the *hijab* for their own reasons, such as ethnic and religious pride.

Teacher's assumptions. Similarly, a common theme in the literature is how teachers similarly perceive their female Muslim students as backward and oppressed by their religious and cultural upbringing. A participant from Jasmin Zine's (2000, p. 310) ethnographic study describes feeling alienated and patronized by the paternalistic attitudes of teachers:

“[They think] that I'm just an ignorant person come straight off the boat from India or whatever. They think that your parents don't know how to treat you and that we think men are superior to us and we are ignorant and we don't know how to act in Canadian society.”

Zine, like other researchers, finds that these negative attitudes transfer over to differential forms of evaluation and treatment, from lowered academic tracking practices to low teacher expectations, such as not expecting Muslim girls to go to college (Haw, 1998; Sarroub, 2005). This theme has not surfaced in the existing research with Somali youth.

Along with teachers' detrimental attitudes and practices, Sarroub describes how teachers become “inadvertent agents of American culture” (2002, p. 91). Teaching with a ‘hidden curriculum’⁹, (what Lewis [2003, p. 151] defines as processes at work in schools in explicit history lessons, in discipline practices, and in interpersonal relations), issues around the notion of sex, sex education and sexuality often contradict Islamic views of education. Haw (1998) concludes that while issues surrounding food, dress, prayer, and language can be addressed, “there is no resolution to the deeper issues of a hidden curricula in these schools determined by different value systems and diverse social structures” (p. 156). Perhaps this factor is at the heart of the culturally specific charter school movement.

⁹ “Hidden curriculum” is term reportedly coined by Phillip Jackson (1968). He argued that “education” must be looked at as a socialization process.

Reactions to Islamophobia. Mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation were descriptions by researchers of Muslim youth feeling alienated, confused, and depressed in western schools. Yet Muslim youth learn how to resist their hostile school environments in different ways. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, research has found that some Muslims have become more religious in exile (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2002; Berns McGown, 1999; De Voe, 2002; Pantea, 2004; Sarroub, 2005; Vayas, 2004; Zine, 2000). Strengthened religiosity can provide Muslim youth with a supportive religious community to counter feelings of alienation by dominant society. On the other hand, Shah (2006) describes that dissatisfaction with a racialized identity pushes some students toward sources which may be dangerous, “To a young teenager’s self-esteem, an association with a ‘powerful’ cosmic identity would be more appealing as compared to a negative racialized identity” (p. 229). Unlike many of the other scholars studying Muslim youth in the West, Shah is one of the few who mentions the dangers of fundamentalism as a potential reaction to their dissatisfaction with their racialized identity. Targeted and profiled in a post 9/11 (American) and 7/7 (British) context, Shah describes how Muslim youth feel insecure and even paranoid, which in turn “breeds defense and defiance” (p. 229). She blames the exclusion and discrimination experienced by Muslim youth in British schools as the reasons for students not integrating into schools and calls for a need for schools to work towards an agenda for inclusion.

Alternatively, Zine (2000) observed a proactive “formalized resistance” in the Canadian Muslim youth of her study. To resist marginalization and to assert a collective Islamic identity, adolescents formed Muslim student organizations (MSA’s). These organizations empowered students and helped students to counteract their subordination

as a religious minority in a secular public school system. In my review of the literature, I found myself searching for more examples of how Muslim youth resisted Islamophobia, but found little more than what I already mentioned. More research is urgently needed in this area and I hope to contribute to this gap with findings from my dissertation study.

I found that there was research, albeit minimal, that also found ways to challenge dominant, Islamophobic assumptions. Louise Archer (2004) critiques the assumption that based on “Muslim culture,” Muslim girls are passive victims of patriarchal discourses. Through single sex discussion groups of 64 British Muslim students, Archer evaluated the ways in which boys and girls talked about their views on Muslim girls’ education and employment. While she found that boys’ discussions did tend to construct Muslim girls as passive (in describing girls’ academic futures being in the hands of their parents and expressing that girls needed protection from a “dangerous western society”), Archer found the girls to be in an assertive process of formulating and negotiating their own choices for their future, including the independent choices of college and career. ‘Choice,’ for the girls, was not a fixed construct set in stone by certain ‘Muslim cultural’ factors; rather choice was conceptualized as fluid and shifting, negotiated and experienced differently across time, context, and social division. While further exploration is needed to understand what lies behind the boys’ denial of women’s choice, I find this study helpful in countering low teacher expectations and in showing an example of the complex identity-making process of Muslim girls.

Returning to identity. I would have liked to have read other studies of like Archer’s (2004) that capture a more complex picture of the identity-making process for non-Black Muslim adolescents. Yet instead of finding that immigrant adolescents are

engaging in a multiplicity of identities (Ngo, 2008; Yon, 2000), the majority of research reveal these youth to be torn between two worlds and between two sets of conflicting cultural values (Haw, 1998, Merry, 2005; Zine, 2000, 2001, 2006). Vayas (2004), for example, found that her participants treated cultural identity making as an “either/or” decision, expressing that they valued and chose one culture over the other, as opposed to embracing both. Like Ngo, the term “in-between” is also used by Louisa Sarroub (2004) in her ethnography of the Yemeni-American *hijabat*¹⁰ in Dearborn, Michigan, although quite differently. In her view, rather than disavow either culture or blend the cultures together in hybridized ways, Muslim girls learn to carefully negotiate the “in-between” spaces between their conservative home and community life and that of the dominant mainstream culture in school—becoming “sojourners.” The *hijabat* maintain social distance from boys, seek accommodations for their dress codes in gym class, and try to be good students so that the option of college is possible, while at the same time being obedient daughters and faithful Muslims that uphold the honor of their family. Caught between two worlds, the girls develop a dual persona to cope with opposing home and school expectations—yet they perceive themselves as failing at both. Zine (2001) also observes the double persona roles with her Canadian Muslim participants as they attempt to gain acceptance from their Black friends who do not understand Islam. These role performances and contrasting pressures between home and school often lead to feelings that range from optimism to desperation, as well as confusion and dissonance.

While reading the literature on non-Black Muslim youth, I found myself longing to speak back to these views that maintain Muslim youth have only to negotiate between

¹⁰ As defined by Sarroub (p. 12): the plural feminine noun used by these girls and community members to denote those who wear the scarf.

two worlds. This simplistic “either/or” discourse unfairly presents the identities of immigrants as unchanging and static (Ngo, 2008). Are there not more instances of a hybridized, ever changing identity, as evidenced by the few studies surrounding East African youth? But perhaps these recurring themes are also necessary to recognize—because critical experiences such as facing Islamophobia are not experienced to the same extent (or at all) as other immigrants. Do East Africans experience less Islamophobia because they are Black and do not appear to be of Arab descent? Does being Black ironically come to serve East African youth in this instance? Would I also find that my participants faced a similar “either/or” decision about their cultural identity when they reflected on their experiences in mainstream schools? These are all questions I brought with me to my study.

School Alternatives

Based on this first section of my literature review, the majority of Muslim youth— East African or not, first generation or second, in the U.S. or elsewhere in the West—are in a precarious position, where conforming to Muslim cultural values constitutes a deviation from dominant cultural norms in the West, yet conforming to dominant cultural norms challenges eastern cultural values. In order to avoid the social pressures towards rapid assimilation into the ways of the dominant culture and society, Muslim immigrant communities have turned to alternative forms of schooling that give attention to and support maintenance of youths’ culture, religion, language, and history (Azmi, 2001; Collet; 2007; Haw, 1994; Zine, 2007). The East African participants central to this study were one such Muslim community that opted to leave their

mainstream schools specifically for an alternative schooling option that better accommodated their religious and cultural backgrounds. The second part of this literature review will examine alternative forms of schooling, such as private religious schools and differing forms of public school choice.

Private Islamic Schools

Private religious education as an alternative to public education has had a long history in the western world. Some Muslim families, with the financial resources to do so, opt to place their children in private Islamic schools when available (Sachs, Nov. 10, 1998). In one of the most important and in-depth studies surrounding the school experiences of Muslim adolescent girls, Haw (1998) discovered that the primary reason that Muslim parents in England chose private Islamic schools for their children was due to the superficial way in which schools recognized their culture. She found that Muslim communities saw private schools as essential not only for the religious instruction of their children, but also for their cultural survival. Haw compared the academic and social experiences of girls in an Islamic girl's school as compared to a non-Islamic public school for girls and found that Muslim girls in the private Islamic school felt more confident and empowered—not only to learn, but also to challenge and assert their rights as women *and* Muslims.

Like Haw, Zine (2006) found that the Canadian Muslim girls she studied felt a greater confidence in expressing their religious identities in their Islamic private school settings than in public schools they had previously attended. Her ethnographic research revealed that students actually felt more 'segregated' in public schools than in their

gender-segregated private Islamic schools due to feeling less accepted because of their faith-centered lifestyles. Wearing the *hijab*, for example, set youth apart from others and led the Muslim youth to feel socially excluded and in fear of ridicule.

Zine's 2007 scholarly work asks the necessary question of whether Islamic schools serve as "safe havens" or "religious ghettos"—a question I also explore in this dissertation study. Drawing from the same ethnographic data as her 2006 study, Zine found that the Islamic private schools did not breed insularity; conversely, the private schools better prepared youth to live out their identities as Muslims, providing them with the "life skills that they needed to maintain their identity within the plurality of society and to develop a basis from which they could interact with others" (p. 79). These findings are contrary to recent research by The Civil Rights Project that finds there to be a number of important educational and civic benefits for students of all races in desegregated high schools (Kurlaender & Yun, 2001). Zine found that the Islamic private schools provided students with a "culturally congruent space" (p. 71) that was free from racism and religious discrimination and also allowed the girls access to learning about their own culture and history—information often unavailable to them while attending public schools. This revealed, she stressed that the Eurocentric schooling practices of Canada can "no longer masquerade as an ideologically neutral space" when in actuality they are affirming certain identities and marginalizing others (p. 89). In the end, Zine concludes that the Muslim youth chose to attend private Islamic centers not out of the desire to separate from mainstream Canadian society, but as a consequence of how they were discriminated against and positioned by dominant society.

My dissertation study shares many similarities with the research of Haw and Zine, but with some critical differences. The East African charter high school central to my study is public, mixed in gender, and secular. It is through the cultural milieu of the school environment and not due to religious instruction that students' religious practices are supported (because as a public school this could be seen as religious coercion). Unlike most private Islamic schools where nearly all of the teachers are Muslim (and often from similar ethnic backgrounds), most of my participants' teachers are White and non-Muslim, both in their mainstream schools and in the East African charter high school. The students I study are also socio-economically disadvantaged (95 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch); very few of my participants' families would have the financial means to afford private Islamic schools. This social class difference is important as my participants are often living in poor, racially segregated neighborhoods that expose youth to ghetto cultures, isolate them from mainstream American society, and provide them with inadequate school conditions (Zhou, 2003). Thus, while my focus is on how students' experience and are shaped by their schools, I must also look deeply at non-school influences (i.e., home life, neighborhood). Additionally, while the students in my study experience Islamophobia in similar ways to the students in Haw's and Zine's studies, the East African students of my study additionally experience racism based on being Black immigrants. The issue of race is largely overlooked in Haw's research, and while discussed in Zine's work, without having a predominantly Black Muslim participant population, she does not address this issue to the degree that I must. Another important differentiation between my work and that of Haw's and Zine's surrounds the fact that I am studying both girls' and boys' experiences in schools. By doing so, I am

able to capture the important experiences of Islamophobia and racialization that both sexes experience in different ways. Finally, while there have been several studies on Muslim youth in Europe and Canada, few studies have specifically explored the academic issues and social demands associated with being an East African/Muslim adolescent in the U.S.—a country that has historically been less-exposed to Muslim immigrants.

School Choice

I now turn to the theme of public “school choice” and, more specifically, to school choice in the U.S. Like my participants, not all families can afford private schools and many do not have access to them where they live. The idea of school choice originated in the 1950s with Milton Friedman’s argument that free-market competition would promote competition and would thereby stimulate improvement to the existing public school system (Zarzour, 2003). In current times, building on the increasing belief that parents should have a greater voice in their child’s education, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (Public Law 107-110) has further expanded school choice by allowing students in failing schools to transfer and have access to other schools that demonstrate higher levels of student achievement. In the last two decades, publicly supported school choice options have proliferated through the growth of voucher programs, magnet schools and charter schools, although not without controversy and their own set of drawbacks.

For example, while support for school choice overall has grown rapidly, support has grown slowly for voucher programs—defined as programs where parents who qualify

are given money (in the form of vouchers) to choose among private and out-of-district schools (Weinberg, 2007). Opponents of voucher programs are against providing public moneys and support to private school education. Despite a 5-4 Supreme Court decision in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* that allowed vouchers to be used in both religious and non-sectarian private schools, there remains highly charged opposition to the unorthodox interpretation of the Establishment clause of the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibiting government sponsored religion (Zarzour, 2003). Today, few cities and states offer vouchers as a school choice option. As of 2005, only 14,000 students receive vouchers in Milwaukee, Cleveland, Florida, and Colorado and the District of Columbia (Weinberg, 2007). Interesting to note that in inner city Milwaukee, one-fourth of students attending Assalam School, an Islamic school, rely on vouchers (Zarzour, 2003).

Magnet school programs, which arose from desegregation plans (American Institutes for Research, 1993), were promoted as specialized schools that could offer a distinctive curricula free from the normal constraints in large districts and that would result in voluntary transfers from both White and minority students. Yet, like private schools, students must test first in order to be a potential candidate for the school. Additionally, magnet schools are tied to geographically fixed attendance boundaries, and therefore not open to all children. As with voucher programs, support for magnet school programs has decreased over time.

Support has not waned for the rapidly growing phenomenon of charter schools. Finn, Manno and Vanourek (2000) define a charter school as an “independent public school of choice, freed from the rules [of mainstream public schools] but [held] accountable for results” (p. 14). In other words, in exchange for having a great deal of

curricular and structural independence, their charters may be revoked if they do not meet certain performance goals that vary from state to state. Unlike most mainstream public schools, charter schools are typically created around a particular educational purpose (e.g., technology, medical careers, art), and often cater to the specific interests of a community. But unlike voucher programs, charter schools, as public schools, are strictly bound to the Establishment Clause and thus cannot offer parents the choice of religious orientation in schooling. So while a charter school may call itself “religiously supportive,” school administrators and teachers may *not* organize or encourage prayer exercises. That said, the Establishment Clause allows for the government, and therefore public schools, to “reasonably” accommodate religious beliefs (*Board of Education v. Grumet*, 1994, 512 U.S. 687, 706). For example, they may allow students to wear religious garb and/or pray during the school day when not engaged in school activities or instruction.

Since 1991, when the first charter school legislation was established in Minnesota, forty of fifty U.S. states now offer the option of placing children in public charter schools (Weinberg, 2007). About 4,000 charter schools currently exist, enrolling 1.1 million students every year (Center for Education Reform, 2006). In efforts to seek school reform, charter schools have been supported across political lines, from the former President Bill Clinton (D) to the current President George Bush (R) (*uscharterschools*, 2003). Proponents see charter schools as ways to provide choices and more power to parents, to educate more effectively and/or efficiently,¹¹ to inspire public schools to be

¹¹ The school itself, not the district, manages the school—which is seen by some to be a more effective form of managing a school (Hill, Pierce, & Guthrie, 1997).

better, and to implement innovative programs as smaller, more flexible entities (Weinberg, 2007).

Opponents of charter schools argue that free-market competition will only improve student achievement if *all* schools are able to compete and if *all* students are free to choose their schools, believing that children left behind in regular mainstream schools will end up in schools with less resources with which to compete (Arsen, Plank, & Sykes, 1999). Some have found that charter schools do not provide equal access; for example, charter schools have been found to exclude students with special needs (Howe and Welner, 2002). Finally and importantly, many argue that charter schools further stratify students along racial and socioeconomic lines (Cobb & Glass, 1999; Horn & Miron, 2000; Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003).

Frankenberg and Lee (2003) reviewed national charter school data and found that charter schools did in fact face high levels of segregation. (They also admitted that many mainstream schools have also struggled with the issue of racial segregation, revealing that in the last three decades Black and Latino students have become especially isolated.) With a quantitative methodological approach, they concluded that the reasons for the segregation had to do with the fact that many charter schools are located in already segregated neighborhoods.

In fact, for an increasing number of minority populations, what makes charter schools especially appealing is that, unlike public schools, charter schools can be created by almost anyone and are specifically chosen by the families of children who attend (Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000). These communities can therefore create, to borrow Nathaniel Popper's (2007) term, "culturally specific" charter schools that better

accommodate their religious and cultural values and beliefs. This is especially appealing to communities uncomfortable with the culture or curriculum of most public schools, who may come to see mainstream public schools as places that instill what they might see as a valueless, materialist worldview into their youth. For a Muslim community, attending a completely secular public school without reasonable accommodation to their Islamic values may be seen as stripping the spiritual element away from their children's everyday lives and unraveling their moral values. While charter schools cannot offer religion classes or overt religious instruction, culturally specific charter schools can offer an "Islamic" environment by virtue of the students they serve.

Purpose of the Study

The present study was conducted in one such culturally specific charter school created by members of an East African community with the specific intention of serving an East African Muslim student population. The charter school is one of the few but growing number of culturally specific charter schools for Muslim immigrants in the country (Popper, Aug. 31, 2007). Charter schools, in general, are a poorly studied form of educational reform (Greene, Forster, & Winters, 2003). Almost no research has been conducted in culturally specific charter schools. One goal of this study is to fill a gap in this dearth of charter school research as I explore East African Muslim students' perceptions of attending a culturally specific charter high school. Specifically, I look at whether or how culturally specific charter schools offer an "additive" educational approach for working with culturally, religiously, racially and linguistically diverse

students. As opposed to the assimilating practices at work in mainstream schools and society (as revealed in the first part of this review), several scholars promote an additive education, which seeks to a.) understand students' diverse needs; b.) recognize immigrants' culture and languages as resources in the adaptation process, and c.) attempts to make mutual adaptations between schools and immigrant students/communities (Gibson, 1995; C. Suarez-Orozco & M. Suarez-Orozco, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Does the East African charter school at the center of this study provide its youth with an additive education in ways that their former mainstream schools were not?

Additionally, this study seeks to explore how East African Muslim students' reflect on their previous experiences in mainstream public schools. In the urban area where this research takes place, the dominant society in this context is Eurocentric and overwhelmingly Judeo-Christian, a cultural context also reflected in the mainstream schools. Few studies have focused on these youths' experiences in mainstream schools. I hope to contribute to an area of needed research by exploring how East African Muslim youth experience and are shaped by these mainstream school environments.

In this literature review, I revealed that Muslim youth have been studied (Haw, 1998; Sarroub, 2002; Zine, 2000, 2001, 2006), but Black Muslim youth to a lesser degree. Most research exploring Muslim immigrant adolescents in the West fails to acknowledge the important role that racism also plays. More studies need to address the cultural and racial injustice that Black Muslim immigrant youth experience in educational settings. Furthermore, the majority of research on Black immigrant adolescents fails to capture the experience of religious discrimination experienced by Black Muslim youth. At this time in the world, when Muslims are misunderstood, stereotyped, feared, and

discriminated against, it is critical that we begin to closely examine how students with minority religious beliefs experience school in the U.S. This study seeks to revisit existing educational conversations, producing needed empirical research that highlights how Black Muslim immigrant youth are affected by academic, racial, cultural and religious discrimination in schools and how differing school contexts serve to affect the overall school experience and identity construction of these youth. A review of the literature has led me to the following research questions:

Research Questions:

1. What stories do East African students tell about their previous experiences in mainstream schools as compared to their current experiences at an East African charter high school?
2. How are students' social and academic identities constructed and co-constructed in these school settings?

Chapter III: Method

Background to the Study

I became aware of Kalsami Charter High School,¹² my research site, through a fellow graduate student in my Case Study Methodology class and this led to our collaborative exploration of the experiences of White, U.S.-born teachers at this school. This was an interesting and relevant topic because the educational experiences of East African immigrant youth are vital factors in education in the state where this research took place. Not only is the state host to the largest Somali population in the country, but Somalis and other East Africans are the fastest-growing immigrant populations here as well. A study of a school intended to serve young people in the East African community was one that was relevant to education in our state. Furthermore, the charter school, created by and intended for members of one community, is one of only a handful that exists in the country. Very little research had been done on this type of program. Finally, as former teachers, we were particularly interested in one group of stakeholders at the school: the White female teachers. Their insights and experiences in the school would speak to us personally, and they would help to elucidate what is essentially an unconventional teaching context in terms that would be easily understandable to other educators.

White teachers' experiences teaching in a school designed by an East African community and created for East African Muslim youth demanded our examination of power, position, and inequities in the school. For example, in our interviews, frustrations surfaced from the White teaching staff toward the academic, organizational, and

¹² Recall that all names (cities, schools, students and staff) used in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

decision-making structures of a school dominated by East African values. A critical stance became evident in our analysis as we challenged teachers' restrictive attitudes and/or passive acceptance of the status quo (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005). This case study grew from its original focus on White, U.S.-born teachers to a year-long study on the perspectives of nearly all the staff of the school (which included several East African-born staff), and our frequent visits to the school resulted in an analysis that was no longer based simply on decontextualized interviews, but rather grounded in the social context of the school as a whole.

While the teachers' perspectives were informative, I wished to explore how the students themselves perceived this unique kind of school. Knowing that many youth had transferred only recently from mainstream schools, I wanted to understand their perspectives about the academic and social demands associated with being an East African adolescent in differing school contexts and how their past and current school experiences had come to shape their identities. The educational system and educational reform has long been based on *adult* notions of how education should be conceptualized and practiced. It seems problematic that we do not more often invite students (those whom schools are ostensibly designed to serve) into that dialogue more often (Cook-Sather, 2002). In hopes of filling this gap, I wanted my dissertation research to be a place to begin to see the world of schooling from students' perspectives, allowing for a collaborative process of authorizing student perspectives in an effort to improve current educational practice, re-inform existing conversations about educational reform, and point to the discussions and reforms yet to be undertaken (Cook-Sather, 2002).

I began my dissertation study with the vision of conducting a yearlong ethnography of newcomer¹³ students from limited formal schooling (LFS) backgrounds. Yet not long after I began observing students from LFS backgrounds, I began to feel something was amiss. As I observed classrooms and as I immersed myself in the literature on East African youths' experiences in schools, I realized that East African students' academic success was impeded by more than just coming from an ESL or LFS background; other issues, such as religious discrimination and racism, were some of the many real and challenging issues that these youth faced. I wanted to critically explore *all* of these issues and their intersections.

I decided that in order to explore these intersections, I needed to talk with East African adolescents. That meant finding a different student population within the charter school that spoke proficient English and that had lived in the U.S. for a longer period of time than the newcomer students. What interested me most were my participants' "storied selves"—not only their stories about the events and conditions of their lives in schools, but also about their self-understandings (Lutrell, 1997). I wanted to understand, through conversations with these students, how their experiences had come to shape their identities—how my participants' had made and remade themselves through their talk. While I continued to borrow from ethnographic methods—learning as much as possible about the cultural setting of Kalsami—at the heart of my research was my desire to focus on the *stories* of East African youth and unravel the meanings of those stories as they aligned, contrasted with or interrupted hegemonic discourses and practices.

¹³ Newcomer students, in this context, are students who have immigrated to the U.S. within the last three years and have little to no proficiency in English.

Research Design and Orientation

Case Study. By employing a case study methodology, I was able to gain a thorough understanding of a situation and the perceptions of those involved in that situation, both of which were at the heart of my research. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995, p. 317) list several “hallmarks” of case study design that specifically speak to this study:

- Case study methodology is concerned with a rich and vivid description of events relevant to the case.
- It provides a chronological narrative of events relevant to the case.
- It blends a description of events with the analysis of them.
- It focuses on individual actors or groups of actors, and seeks to understand their perceptions of events.
- It highlights specific events that are relevant to the case.
- An attempt is made to portray the richness of the case in writing up the report.

Additionally, I used a case study design due to its focus on providing a detailed description and analysis of a bounded system (Merriam, 1998). The study was bounded by place (Kalsami High School), by participants (students and staff), and by time (the 2006-2007 academic school year).¹⁴ Using what Yin (2003) refers to as a multiple case study design, I emphasized the individual cases, acknowledging the unique experience each participant had in their mainstream and charter schools. During data analysis, individual cases were compared in a cross-case analysis.

¹⁴ While this study was conducted over the course of the 2006-07 academic year, it builds upon a previous study conducted during the 2005-06 academic year. The previous study (Basford, Hick, & Bigelow, 2007) focused on the perspectives of teachers, while the current study focuses primarily on the perspectives of students.

This case study can be characterized as “particularistic,” “interpretive,” and “explanatory.” It is particularistic as it focuses on a special program or situation (Merriam, 1998)—that of participants’ experiences at one of the only East African charter high schools in the country. It is interpretive as it allows the researcher the opportunity to leap from data to conclusions (Merriam, 1998). It is explanatory because it seeks to explain and understand the phenomena (Yin, 2003).

Ultimately, my dissertation¹⁵ is a qualitative study that draws from both interpretive and critical research orientations. The overall methodological approach was based on interpretation and understanding. To understand how East African adolescents experience schools in the U.S., and also to discover the ways in which they understand themselves in the process, ethnography informed the methodology of this study. I wanted to understand the multiple realities socially constructed by my participants as they reflected upon their differing school experiences. Observing my participants in their classroom and school provided contextual details I felt were necessary to my study. Analyses are often based on decontextualized texts rather than on grounded, interactional data that occur within a larger frame of interactions (Rogers, et. al., 2005). Context in my study was needed in order to describe the nature and culture of this school, and to understand more deeply the realities, possibilities, and disadvantages afforded to students by this kind of school. Thus, immersing myself in my participants’ school environment provided me with a lens from which to a.) witness participants experiences at school; b.) make available classroom events to draw from in our interviews; and, perhaps most important, c.) establish a trusting relationship with participants.

¹⁵ IRB approval was granted September 12, 2006 (Human Subjects Code Number 0608P90154).

A critical research perspective was also necessary in this study. By asking East African immigrant youth to reflect on their experiences in U.S. schools, I was concerned with issues of power, influence, and equity in schools. On one hand, I looked at how power is reproduced in society against the participants of my study. On the other hand, I examined how East African youth made and remade, resisted and transformed themselves through their talk. As participants shared their stories with me, I sought to understand the process of how ‘truths’ emerge, how social realities and identities are built and the consequences of these (Wetherall, 2004). I concur with Gee (2005) that “truth is a matter of taking, negotiating, and contesting perspectives created in and through language” (p. 5). Literal truth was not what I was seeking. Instead, I was interested in understanding what mattered most to my participants and making sense of the past and present within their individual and collective lives. I chose to look at my participants’ language as constructive, functional, a form of action, and open to a plethora of influences as well as possibilities. Yet I also recognize that language is not a neutral linguistic resource, but something that is already ‘overpopulated’ with other people’s voices and social practices (Bakhtin, 1981). A critical research orientation provided me a theoretical lens with which to view my participants’ talk.

Research Context

East African students in Allenberg. As mentioned, the East African population as a whole has grown rapidly over the past ten years. As a site of secondary migration due to the draw of a large and now established co-ethnic community, a large majority of these East African immigrants reside in Allenberg—the large, urban city where my dissertation

research took place. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Allenberg had a total population of 382,618; the total metropolitan area had a population of roughly 3.5 million (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division (2005-0-01). Schools and educators in Allenberg face rapidly changing student demographic profiles.

Mainstream schools. My study includes two schooling contexts. The first context surrounds students' *perceptions* of K-12 mainstream public schools. I did not observe youth or staff as they attended or taught in mainstream schools; my observations and data collection took place entirely in the second school context, Kalsami High School. So while students and school staff also described at length their experiences in mainstream schools, their descriptions were shared through a lens that was altered by their more recent experiences at Kalsami. The East African youth I interviewed attended a variety of urban and suburban mainstream school programs, all of which were either located in Allenberg or in the surrounding metropolitan area. While attending mainstream primary schools with large East African student populations, some student participants had the opportunity to directly learn from East African teachers or educational assistants, but the majority did not. As students moved into larger secondary mainstream programs, with 3,000 or more students in a high school setting, participants reported that opportunities to learn from an East African teacher or assistant ceased. In every mainstream school context, my student participants were minorities in their schools.

Kalsami High School. The central locus of this study is Kalsami High School, an East African charter high school. Displeased with their children's experiences in public schools, the East African community members of Allenberg created Kalsami with the specific intention of serving East African Muslim youth. In 2001, the founders of

Kalsami High School created the elementary and middle school. Three years later, Kalsami High School, grades 9-11, was added as a response to the community's desire to see their youth continue to be educated in similar setting for high school grades. In 2006-2007, grade 12 was added to Kalsami High School, making several of the senior students I interviewed part of the first graduating class of the school.

The high school was located in an industrial area of Allenberg, in a building that formerly housed a factory. At the time of data collection the school was in its third year of operation, the student population was 98 percent East African Muslim—the majority of which were Somali, about 10 percent were Oromo-Ethiopian, and about 2 percent were from the Middle East. The school had a Somali-led school board, a Somali co-administrator and several East African-born teachers and educational assistants. Of the 230 9th-12th graders that attended Kalsami, approximately 95 percent qualified for free and reduced breakfast and lunch program. The school was at its maximum capacity and there was a waiting list for students wishing to attend the school. Among the student population, there were some students who had spent nearly all of their lives in the U.S., while others arrived only months before enrolling at Kalsami. While 52% of the student population was designated as Limited English Proficient (LEP) and received English as a Second Language (ESL) support, the school's White administrator and several ESL staff estimated that a more accurate LEP figure was around 80%.

As a public school, Kalsami High School is of no cost for students or their parents. But as a public school, Kalsami is obliged to follow the Establishment Clause of the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibiting government sponsored religion. In fact, Kalsami's mission statement avoids any discussion of culture or religion, stating

the specific goal of the school is to provide students with a “rigorous, academic [experience] that will prepare them for college and the pursuit of medical or other meaningful careers in [the] community” (taken from the charter school website).

However, several features of the school and the student body reflected the specific cultural and religious background of the students. Muslim students and staff were provided with specific prayer rooms and school officials made time for prayer throughout the day.¹⁶ On Fridays a few parents or community members performed the *salah* (prayer)¹⁷ in the building where nearly all students attend classes. The school’s schedule accommodated this by ending classes early on Fridays, so that the services occurred outside of class time, a requirement for following the first amendment religion clause. In the cafeteria, *halal*¹⁸ meals were served to students and staff. There was no written dress code; however, out of deference to their religious beliefs, boys wore only long pants and long-sleeved shirts and every female student at Kalsami High School wore a *hijab*.

Other features of the school also reflected Muslim students’ beliefs and practices. For example, students were separated by gender for physical education. This allowed girls to engage in physical activity and not have contact with boys. Students were also segregated by gender for health education classes. Another way the school attempted to be culturally responsive was to offer Arabic as the foreign language. In addition, because

¹⁶ In Islam, daily prayers are called “*Salah*,” or ritual prayers. They are to be performed five times a day. Facing Mecca, the prayer is intended to focus the mind on God, while expressing gratitude and worship.

¹⁷ On Fridays, Muslims perform the weekly *Jumu’ah* Prayer, which replaces the usual daily prayer. The prayer is mandatory for males, but frequently attended by females. The East African males and females of this study equally participated with this prayer.

¹⁸ *Halal* food is food permissible to Islamic law. For example, any pig-based products, blood, animals killed in the name of anyone but God are all food items that are not considered *halal*.

of Islamic prohibitions regarding artistic and musical representations, teachers tended not to use artwork or music as teaching tools at Kalsami High School.

The school environment supported students' commitment to maintaining an East African cultural and national identity by employing a number of East African staff members who served as administrators, parent liaisons, teachers and educational assistants. At the time of the study, a team of two administrators led the high school: one Somali-born administrator with a background as a teacher (in Somalia) and one White, U.S.-born administrator with a background in education (former high school coach, teacher and principal). Of the nineteen teachers at Kalsami High School, fifteen were White and U.S.-born, three teachers were Black and East African-born and one was Black and Nigerian-born.

Participants

Primary research participants. Primary research participants for this study were nineteen students from Kalsami High who were purposefully selected. Jane, whose classes I primarily observed and who I relied on as my key informant, provided me with valuable recommendations about which students might best fit the study. Having been a teacher at Kalsami since the school was first opened and having taught several of my participants for two or more years, Jane not only carried a wealth of insider knowledge about both the school and her students, but was also highly reputed as a teacher by her students. Initially, Jane chose about twenty-five students from her English classes that she thought might fit my primary criteria of having attended a U.S. mainstream school prior to coming to Kalsami. After introducing the study to these students, all twenty-five

expressed an interest in participating. Students then filled out a survey that provided me with specific information on whether or not they met my additional criteria. In addition to looking for students who had previously attended mainstream elementary, middle and/or high schools prior to attending Kalsami, I sought out participants who were either Somali or Ethiopian in ethnicity, who had a broad range of diversity in their previous social and academic experiences, and who were orally proficient in English. Due to all students' intermediate to advanced oral proficiency in English, an interpreter was not necessary. I obtained both verbal and written informed consent from the students who wished to participate in the study. An information letter describing the study was given to students' parents or guardians.

In the end, based on Jane's recommendations and survey information, I chose nineteen students, twelve female and seven male to participate as focal students in the study. All students described themselves as Muslim religiously and as Black 'racially.' All students had previously attended mainstream schools before coming to Kalsami. Eighteen of nineteen students were selected from Jane's two English classes, with the exception of Najima who came from Amy's ESL classroom. All students but Najima claimed to be more literate in English than in their native Somali or Oromo language. Additionally noteworthy, of six senior participants, five had received university scholarships. And of nineteen male and female participants, five had returned to Africa at some point in their childhood—in most cases, to borrow students' words, in efforts for them to "remember their culture" or to counter the "Americanization" processes at work in mainstream schools (which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4).

Eighteen of nineteen student participants were born in Somalia and one was born in the Oromo region of Ethiopia.¹⁹ All youth arrived in the U.S. by the age of eleven and nearly half arrived before the age of seven. Using the sociological definition of nativity status (cf. Ricardo & Stanton-Salazar, 2001), six participants were foreign-born youth that arrived in the U.S. before the age of five, giving them 1.75-generation status. Nine participants were foreign born youth that arrived in the U.S. between the ages of six and ten, giving them 1.5-generation status. Four participants were foreign born youth that arrived in the U.S. at the age of eleven, giving them 1.25-generation status (1.25 generation are youth who have arrived between the ages of eleven and fifteen). More information about student participants is listed in Table 1, below.

Table 1: <i>Student Participants</i>							
KEY:							
MS: Mainstream school							
K: Kalsami							
A: Returned to Africa for long-term visit							
S: Scholarship recipient to college/university							
+: Spent some time at East African charter middle school created by Kalsami founders							
Student	Country of origin	Age/ grade	Post-immigration school experience	Yrs at K	Language spoken at home	A	S
Girls							
1. Zayah	Somali	18, senior	grades 5-9 MS grades 10-12 K	3	Somali		X
2. Nusaybah	Somali	17, junior	grades 1-6 MS grades 7-11 K	5+	Somali & English		
3. Zuhuur	Somali	17, junior	grades K-8 MS grades 9-11 K	3	English		
4. Najima	Somali	17, junior	grades 6-10.5 MS grades 10.5-11 K	.5	Somali & Swahili		

¹⁹ The Oromo are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. Their native language is the Oromo language. The Oromo students at Kalsami are all Muslim.

5. Ubah	Somali	17, junior	grades K-7 MS grades 8-11 K	4+	English	X	
6. Iftu	Somali	17, junior	grades 2-5 MS grades 6-7 Syria grades 8 MS grades 9-11 K	2	Somali	X	
7. Sarah	Somali	17, junior	grades 4-8 MS grades 9-11 K	4+	Somali		
8. Ladan	Somali	17, junior	grades 6-9 MS grades 10-11 K	2	Somali		
9. Asha	Somali	15, freshman	grades 1-9 MS (one quarter of grade 9) grades 9 K	1	English		
10. Hamdi	Somali	15, freshman	grades 1-9 MS (one quarter of grade 9) grade 9 K	1	English		
11. Sumaya	Somali	15, freshman	grades 2-4 MS grades 5-8 K grade 9 MS	3.5+	Somali		
12. Nadifa	Somali	15, freshman	grades K-8 MS grade 9 K	1	English		
Boys							
13. Abdi	Somali	19, senior	grades K-7 MS grade 8, in Syria grade 9 MS grade 10-12 K	3	Somali	X	X
14. Mohamed	Somali	18, senior	grades K-6, in Holland grades 6-11.5 MS grade 11.5-12 K	1.5	Somali		X
15. Walid	Somali	18, senior	grade 5-9 MS grade 10 K grade 11 M grade 12 K	2	Somali		
16. Hussein	Somali	18, senior	grade 5-9.5 MS grade 9.5-12 K	2.5	English	X	X
17. Magarsa	Oromo	17, senior	grade 4-5 MS grade 6 K grade 7-8 MS grade 9-12 K	4+	Oromo		X
18. Abdullahi	Somali	17, junior	grade 4-9 MS grade 10-11 K	2	Somali	X	

19. Ali	Somali	16, soph- more	grades 5-7 MS grade 8 K grade 9-9.5 MS (one semester) grade 9.5-10 K	2.5+	English		
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Secondary research participants. Secondary research participants for this study were fifteen teachers and administrators, including eight teachers, a school founder/board member, two high school co-directors, a middle school co-director, a curriculum coordinator, a parent liaison, and a counselor. All staff interviewed had interacted with or taught the student participants at Kalsami High School. Their inclusion allowed me to explore the “co-constructed” aspect of students’ identities. Additionally, data collected from the previous study (Basford, Hick & Bigelow, 2007) was used to inform the current study.

In the end, I interviewed all staff who expressed an interest in participating in the study and who fulfilled my criteria of previously having worked with East African youth in mainstream schools. Response to the study was overwhelmingly positive, with only one staff member declining to be interviewed due to time constraints. Staff voiced an interest in learning more about how students’ perceived schools in the U.S., especially wanting to learn perspectives about Kalsami experiences in comparison to mainstream school experiences. Oral and written informed consent was obtained before all interviews took place. For a demographic breakdown of the school staff participants from both the current study, conducted during the 2006-07 academic year, and from the previous study, conducted during the 2004-05 academic year, see Table 2, on the next page.

Data for 2006-07 Study: Teachers and Administrators					
Name	Previous mainstream school experience	Years working at mainstream schools	Position at Kalsami	Years working at Kalsami	Teaching credential at Kalsami
1. Abdullah	ESL teacher & Kalsami founder	10	board president/ school founder	3	* (* = information unknown)
2. Abshir	teacher assistant	6	parent liaison/ teacher asst	3	None
3. Amy	ESL teacher	5.5	ESL teacher	2	Licensure/ M.A. Ed: ESL
4. Andrea	social studies teacher	14	co-director: middle school	1	Licensure: Social Studies
5. Anne	science/health teacher	5	curriculum coordinator	3	Licensure: Life Science & K-12 Principal M.A. Ed: Curriculum & Instruction
6. Babatunde	PE/health teacher & teacher assistant	12	PE/health teacher	1	Licensure/ M.A. Ed: Physical Ed/Health
7. Don	social studies teacher & high school principal	*	co-director: high school	1	Licensure: Social Studies Licensure: K-12 Principal
8. Fatah	math/science teacher	7	co-director: high school	3	In process of getting license/ M.A. Ed: Science Education
9. Isaac	ESL teacher	6	ESL teacher	1	Licensure: ESL
10. Jane (key informant)	English teacher	14	English teacher	3	Licensure/ M.A. Ed: English

11. Mary	guidance counselor	*	guidance counselor	1	*
12. Matt	PE/health teacher	11	special education teacher	1	Licensure/ M. A Physical Ed/Health MA: SPED
13. Petra	ESL teacher	2	ESL teacher	1.5	Licensure: ESL
14. Ted	art teacher	2	art teacher	1	Licensure: Art Ed
15. Terry	English teacher	43	English teacher	1	Licensure: English

Data for 2004-05 Study: Teachers and Administrators					
(Note: Several 2006-07 participants also took part in the 2004-05 study, including: Abdullah, Abshir, Amy and Anne.)					
16. Ahmed	math teacher	*	science teacher	3	Licensure: Science Ed
17. Diane	math teacher	1	math teacher	2	B.A. & M.A.: Math In process of getting M.A. in Math Ed
18. Leslie	ESL teacher	5	ESL teacher	2	Licensure: ESL M.A. Ed: Curriculum & Instruction
19. Mustafa	math teacher	2	math/science teacher	3	Licensure: Math/Science In process of getting M.A. in Teaching
20. Zacharia	teacher assistant	*	science teacher	3	B.A. Physics/Math Licensure: Science Ed

As can be seen by Table 2, school staff participants came to Kalsami with differing levels of previous experience in mainstream schools. Some had worked in mainstream schools for only two years while others came with up to forty-three years of experience before coming to Kalsami. School staff participants were also diverse with regards to their work

positions both in mainstream schools and at Kalsami, working as educational assistants, counselors, parent liaisons, teachers and administrators.

Data Sources

In conducting this study, I used multiple data sources for purposes of triangulation. The three main sources of data came from student and staff individual interviews, focus group interviews and classroom observations. Additional sources of data included student assignments, teacher documents, interview transcripts from the previous Kalsami study (Basford, Hick & Bigelow, 2007), a student questionnaire, and other school documents. The research questions and data sources are listed below in Table 3, which is later followed by a more detailed description of what the data sources entailed.

Table 3: Main and Sub Research Questions	Data Sources
<p>Q1: What stories do East African students tell about their previous experiences in mainstream schools as compared to their current experiences at an East African charter high school?</p> <p>Q2: How are East African students' social and academic identities constructed and co-constructed in these school settings?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what way(s) does the schooling experience influence adolescents' identity? • How do Somali youth assert their identities in mainstream schools, in their charter school, as East Africans and/or as Americans? 	<p>Interviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual student and staff interviews (49) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Past experiences ○ Current experiences ○ Outlook for future • Focus group interviews (2) with students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Themes from individual interviews ○ Coursework ○ School events <p>Observations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observations of two English classrooms • Additional observations of in-school activities (in hallways, during lunch, before/after school, school field trips) and

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do their identities shift over time, over different contexts? • How do students conceptualize their academic abilities? • How do students conceptualize their religiosity? How do they conceptualize being viewed as Muslim by others? • How do students conceptualize race? How do they conceptualize being racialized by others? • How do students think of themselves in relationship to their peers, the school(s), and society? • How do teachers view and “do” their role(s) within the school? 	<p>out-of-school activities (graduation ceremony, wedding, teacher-researcher social events)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes <p>Additional sources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal discussions with teachers / students • Students’ written assignments • Teachers’ written documents • Email dialogue with students and staff • Initial student questionnaire • Interview transcripts from previous study
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Individual student interviews. During the 2007 spring semester, I conducted twenty-one individual interviews with nineteen focal students. For all individual interviews, I used Patton’s (1980, p. 206) “Interview Guide Approach,” where topics and issues are determined in advance, but the interviewer decides the sequence and wording of questions during the course of each interview. By using this approach, data collection was somewhat systematic for each participant, but interviews were also able to remain conversational in nature (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). A drawback to this approach is that some important topics may be inadvertently omitted. In such cases, follow-up emails and informal conversations allowed me to collect omitted information.

Most participants (17) were interviewed once. Two focal students were interviewed twice due to time constraints. Each interview lasted between one and two hours and focused on participants’ previous and current school experiences. Additionally, individual interviews served as a place to discuss coursework, school events, and their future plans. The interviews were audio taped and later transcribed for analysis. For a list of individual interview questions, see Appendix A.

Teacher/administrator individual interviews. Also during the spring of 2007, I conducted twenty-four individual interviews with Kalsami administrators and teachers, also using Patton's "Interview Guide Approach." Interviews lasted between one and two hours and focused on staffs' previous experiences working with East African youth in mainstream schools as opposed to their current experiences at Kalsami. Most of the staff were interviewed once, however I formally interviewed my key teacher-informant, Jane, three times, my previous teacher-informant, Amy, twice, and another administrator (who had helped open the school) twice. Additionally, some data from the previous study (Basford, Hick & Bigelow, 2007) was used to inform the current study. For a list of individual interview questions, see Appendix B.

Focus group student interviews. Focus group interviews have been found to be useful to triangulate with individual interviews and observations (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000), and served as a method for member checking. Nearly all students who interviewed individually also participated in one of two focus group interviews. One focus group, called the "Achieve High" focus group, was a group of ten junior- and senior-level male and female students enrolled in an advanced-level English course for which they received college credit. The other focus group, called the "Make-up Girls"²⁰ focus group, was a group of four freshman-level students who many teachers and students viewed as some of the most "Americanized"²¹ kids in the school.

The focus group interviews with students were conducted *after* individual interviews took place. I specifically chose to conduct focus interviews after individual

²⁰ Kalsami teachers coined a group of freshman girls the "Make-up Girls" because from time to time they wore facial make-up, an uncommon practice at Kalsami.

²¹ Staff reported these youth to be more "Americanized" than other youth due to the way they resisted Kalsami rules and "acted out" in classes more than most other youth in the school.

interviews in order to avoid group influence on participants. Using the same protocol as I used for individual student interviews, focus group interviews further explored themes and issues that surfaced in the individual interviews, classroom observations, and school events. While the focus group data generally mirrored the data collected from individual interviews, it was interesting to observe the group's sometimes-intense emotion around a certain topic (i.e., non-Muslim students' assumptions about wearing the *hijab*) that was missing from my individual interviews. Focus group interviews were audio taped and later transcribed for analysis.

A note here on the transcription of student and staff interviews. I personally transcribed interviews word for word. As I wrote Chapter 4, I attempted to maintain the authenticity of their statements as much as possible. That said, at times certain grammatical problems were corrected to make their statements read easier (i.e., changing verb tense). If a student used descriptor words such as the word "like" multiple times in a statement (i.e., "It was like so hard to like concentrate..."), I might omit the word to make the statement more readable. If a participant had a lengthy comment and I only wanted certain key sentences in the comment, I omitted parts of the dialogue by using "... " to show breaks in between the data. I bracketed all data where I inserted words other than the participants' words in efforts to better help the reader understand the context of what was said. Finally, when participants added a great deal of stress or emotion to certain words in their comments, I italicized that word. If I chose to italicize the word in order to draw the reader's attention to it, I reveal that the stress is my emphasis within the quote.

Observations. From September to November of 2006, when the focus of my study centered around students from limited formal schooling backgrounds, I observed

Amy's ESL classrooms between one and three times per week. From November of 2006 until June of 2007, I observed Jane's two English classrooms between one and three times per week. During both of these time periods, observations lasted between three and five hours per day. Additionally, I attended parent-teacher conferences, staff meetings, and school board meetings. Throughout all observations, I wrote detailed field notes about these interactions that described student behavior, descriptions of events, my own activities and thoughts and reconstructions of conversations.

Observations allowed me to understand the nature of the student experience (Patton, 1990), establish rapport with students, select focal students, and collect written records such as student writing and school documents. As a participant-as-observer (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993), I was neither a complete observer nor a complete participant. While I maintained distance at times in order to observe the dynamics of the classroom, the students, the contexts, etc., I was also engaging regularly with students by helping them with their assignments and even teaching a class from time to time.

Student assignments. Especially while observing Jane's English classes, students sometimes provided me with copies of their written assignments, typically in the form of essays. The topics for these essays ranged from responses to literature to life-changing moments to arguments for/against "mono-cultural"²² charter schools. Student assignments served the purpose of occasionally providing a topic to discuss during informal classroom or hallway conversations, or during individual and focus group interviews.

²² "Monocultural" is a term taken from a student's description about the sheltered nature at Kalsami High School.

Teacher documents and previous interview transcripts. I collected and analyzed Jane's own writing about her experiences teaching at Kalsami High School, including a series of essays she had published locally in venues like university newsletters, as well as her on-going blog. I also re-analyzed the formal interview transcripts of Kalsami staff members from the 2005-2006 teacher-perspective study (mentioned at the beginning of this chapter). Having interviewed several of the same teachers and administrators in the earlier study and having asked a few similar questions in both studies, the transcripts provided me with an opportunity to observe whether perspectives had changed between 2005 and 2007.

Student questionnaire. At the beginning of the 2007 spring semester, I gave students interested in participating in my study a survey that provided me with some necessary background information, such as: a.) nationality, b.) immigration history, c.) language proficiency, and d.) prior schooling experiences (before and after immigrating to the United States). In addition to background data, the survey primarily asked students open-ended questions, such as asking them to briefly describe their experiences at former mainstream schools and at Kalsami. These open-ended responses contained what Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000, p. 255) call "gems" of information that provided me with an initial preview of their perspectives as well as a conversation starter for future interviews. See Appendix C for student questionnaire.

Other school documents. Finally, I also examined official documents from Kalsami High School. Important school documents included the school's Annual Report, the public website of the school, mission and background statements, curriculum plans, and newspaper and other published articles about the school. This data provided me with

information about the school was represented to the public (i.e., through the media), as well as how the school was represented toward educators (i.e., through accountability measures like assessment data).

Data Analysis

An interdisciplinary approach was used for the on-going analysis of the data (interview data, direct observation data, and assignment/questionnaire/document data). I focused on students' *experiences* by looking for themes across the data. I constructed categories from the interview data according to Merriam's (1998, p. 181) guidelines: by reading through one transcript and taking notes; grouping those notes together; and continuing with the next transcript. I then compared the categories, named them, and came up with a classification scheme. From that, I used multiple-source triangulation through mining the documents and re-examining notes from direct observations of the field site. These additional sources of data helped to refine and revise the categories identified from the research data. I stayed focused on the students' and staff members' perceptions, but it was important to be able to contextualize and verify their comments in order to analyze them with more depth and complexity through use of other data sources.

Additionally, I focused on how my participants *constructed and co-constructed their identities* through language and how their language performed ideological work. Faced with interview transcripts, field notes from observations and other data, I looked for key themes and points, patterns of communication and beliefs that functioned in my participants' talk —words I hypothesized were important to understanding the language I wished to analyze. I looked for the social and political characteristics embedded in

participants' language and for how that language was used to communicate the social construction of their identities, as well as the context in which this language was used. How did they describe, rearrange, invent, omit and revise the experiences of their lives? What patterns of communication had relevance for what? What ideologies functioned in my participants' talk?

For example, early on in an interview, Zayah, a Somali-American senior, expressed her belief that Kalsami needed more "diversity" to prepare youth for the "outside world." She said, "I don't think it is a good idea to take your kids to a school with [only] a certain race... that's one thing I'd change about Kalsami [because] you need that diversity, especially for college." Yet later in her interview, she contrasted her earlier conclusion about Kalsami, saying that it was the lack of "diversity" that helped make her feel "special" and successful in school. She shared, "[Because] the whole school is Somalis, I'm kind of like a role model... had there been more diversity, I wouldn't have had as much chance... I might just be one of those normal kids in the crowd." From Zayah's quote we can observe how she revised and rearranged her perspectives through the duration of the interview. Similar to many other students interviewed, youth appeared to follow a similar pattern of communication where they found it necessary at some point in the interview to complain about the "lack of diversity" at Kalsami (an ideology that functioned in their talk). Yet when further probed, students often contradicted themselves in ways similar that Zayah did. In the end, Zayah, like the majority of students interviewed, *also* revealed an ideology that strongly supported attending a school with students from shared cultural, religious and racial backgrounds.

Credibility. Throughout data collection and analysis, my “voice” has undoubtedly affected participants’ “voices.” As I created my interview protocols, chose quotes from transcripts, edited their words, and interpreted and analyzed them in my own ways, I have recognized my power and influence in this study. Therefore, to establish credibility, to make sure that I am honoring my participants’ words and intentions, I looked first and foremost for agreement from them. By restating, summarizing, and paraphrasing information received from a participant I was able to ensure that what I had previously heard was in fact correct. Even after data collection ceased, the iterative and ongoing sharing of my findings with study participants have continued to be of critical importance. For example, focus group interviews with students were initial efforts to seek out student opinion about my own findings and conclusions, thereby increasing the validity or trustworthiness of my research findings (Kuzel & Like, 1991). To date, my entire findings have been shared with Jane, my key informant. Numerous other parts of my findings have been shared with several student participants to insure that I was not speaking *for* them, but opening up a space for them to be heard. By the end of the 2007-2008 academic year, I intend to share the completed study with all student and staff participants so that I might have the opportunity once again to receive important feedback, critique and/or affirmation. By gaining feedback on results from the participants, I add an assessment of the believability of the research findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

In addition to agreement, I also looked for coverage (ideas from one part of the data applied to other parts) and convergence (ideas from new data continued to support ideas from prior data), and support from a variety of different linguistic details in the

data. Using multiple data sources, multiple informants, and multiple methods (e.g., participant observation, focus groups), I was able to gather an array of perspectives that provided me with a more complete understanding and analysis of the situation at hand (Kuzel & Like, 1991). My analysis remained open to revisions as I learned all that I could about the context and until I came to a point where what I learned ceased to change in any substantive way.

Researcher's Role

At various times while conducting this study, I have questioned my right to research and write about East African Muslim adolescents as a White, middle-class, not formally religious woman who was born and raised in the United States. I recognize that it is not possible to objectively stand outside of my participants' discourse and analyze it without my own identity and interpretations affecting what I write. Inevitably, their stories are affected by my own perceptions and by my interactions with participants. Even so, I believe that if the research is conducted carefully, my perspectives can add to other perspectives by researchers who differ in age, ethnic background, religious faith, etc. Together our perspectives can contribute to what Haw (1996) terms as the "melting pot" (p. x) of research so that they can be critically examined, reinterpreted and so contribute to debate in the area.

In order to conduct careful and meaningful cross-cultural research it is critical to find a methodological framework that a.) includes the voices of the study's participants, and b.) involves reflexivity on the researcher's part. My overarching research goal is not to speak for my participants; rather, my research with East African youth is a place for

mutual work. As has been stressed thus far in this chapter, I relied on my participants' perspectives and cultural understandings to help me uncover and analyze multiple realities and experiences (Tillman, 2002). By placing my participants' knowledge and experiences at the center of my inquiry, I strove to protect the cultural integrity of my participants and respect the authenticity of their words. For *that* is what drives my research—to seek out the voices, voices that are often marginalized and suppressed, and open up the spaces for those voices to be heard.

As one year turned into two years of observing and interacting with participants at Kalsami High School, I was made aware of the important role that time has in establishing relationships and trust between my participants and myself. While initially students may have viewed me with skepticism and reserve, my numerous visits to their classrooms, our lunchroom chats, my attendance at a wedding and their graduation ceremony have resulted in a relationship where I feel much more like a comrade and non-threatening confidante. The same could be said for my relationship with staff participants. Teachers and administrators may have initially viewed me as an academic, and thus established a more formal relationship with me. But as the months went by, I worked to lower the formality and raise the comfort level of our relationship by developing camaraderie with them as a former teacher. The investment of time at Kalsami not only provided me with a necessary contextual piece for my study, but also served to develop a level of trust and engagement between my participants and I that I might not have otherwise known.

I believe that the rich and meaningful data of this study is a direct result of the trusting relationships I developed with participants. Through formal interviews with

participants *after* spending almost two years with them in their school, students and staff came to recognize my commitment not only to the study, but also to them. Additionally, I was both explicit and transparent with participants about the goals of my study. Participants eagerly agreed with my intention to use their words to inform educators about how to make schools better places for Black Muslim immigrant youth.

Even as familiarity with participants grew and our relationship strengthened over time, I remained aware of the power and privilege that I, the researcher, brought to the study—a perception I kept in the forefront of my mind throughout all of my interactions with participants. As researchers, we must be aware of our own actions and critically reflect on how we hear, what we say, the choices we make, the voice we use and the development of practices routine to our research (Razack, 1993). Ultimately, by continually turning the analytic frame back on myself—acknowledging the central role I played in this study and, simultaneously, striving to place the experiences of East African students at the center of this inquiry—I hope that I have placed myself in a position to represent and interpret the voices of these youth.

Chapter IV: Findings

Introduction to Findings

In this chapter, I explore how East African Muslim youth experience and become shaped by the environments of U.S. *mainstream schools* as compared to *Kalsami High School*, an East African charter high school designed by an East African community and intended specifically for East African students. Findings are organized around three major themes that emerged in students' stories about their experiences in mainstream school environments and at Kalsami High School. East African youth described how they felt they were a) perceived academically; b) understood religiously and culturally, and finally; c) received as Black immigrant youth. Each theme begins with students' reflections of their previous *experiences* in mainstream schools and is then followed by their current experiences and perceptions of attending Kalsami High School.²³

Additionally, I compare and discuss how students negotiate their academic, cultural and religious, and racial *identities* as they experience the two different kinds of school contexts in this study. Teacher and administrator narratives²⁴ are also included to validate or provide a different lens with which to view students' narratives. Additionally, teacher and administrator narratives help us better understand the co-constructed aspect of youths' identity development.

Visibility. When I began interviewing students about their perceptions of attending mainstream schools and Kalsami High School, nearly all of my participants

²³ Recall that other than the occasional field trip, I did not observe students or teachers in mainstream schools. Students and school staff described their former experiences in mainstream schools through a lens that was altered by their current experiences at Kalsami High School.

²⁴ Recall that all teacher and administrator narratives come from Kalsami Charter High School staff who previously worked in mainstream secondary schools.

began their discussion by talking about their visibility in schools. For example, when discussing students' experiences in mainstream schools, participants opened with how they felt "isolated" or "lost." Students described themselves as "outsiders," "strangers" and "borderline." Whether they attended an urban, suburban or rural school program, whether they were one of a few East Africans in the school or one of many, participants described feeling invisible and unknown in their mainstream schools—a feeling made especially intense while attending large mainstream high schools. The following are examples of their sentiments in their own words:

1. *Zayah (Somali-American,²⁵ female, senior):* It was my problem not speaking English. It was my problem coming to a new country. It was my problem wearing the head cover. It was just my problem. At Washington it was like I didn't exist that whole year basically.
2. *Hussein (Somali-American, male, senior):* At Adams the classes, the school, it was so big. You can get lost in there. You're not well known. You're just part of the crowd over there. That's the difference.
3. *Ali (Somali-American, male, sophomore):* If you go [to school] over there [in north Allenberg], there was like only one other Somali kid in the whole school. It was like, I don't know... I was alone.
4. *Ladan (Somali-American, male, junior):* It was hard. I was young, colored, didn't speak English well. I felt weird, awkward, out of place.
5. *Ubah (Somali-American, female, junior):* You're so different from everybody else. You feel isolation... I was like a stranger in all my classes.

Students were not the only ones who began describing school experiences around the issue of visibility. Don, the principal of Kalsami and former principal of a rural, mainstream high school began his comparison of Kalsami to mainstream schools in the following way:

²⁵ I choose to refer to students and staff as "Somali-American" or "Ethiopian-American" in my descriptors because while all were born in East Africa (either Somalia or Ethiopia), youth have lived nearly all of their lives in the U.S. and all hold U.S. citizenship status.

Don (White, male, administrator²⁶): In mainstream schools the Somali kids just get crushed. They don't get what they need. The bigger high schools just don't reach out to them. Students are lost. Kids feel like they're different or out there. I think schools are setting those kids up for failure.

Using words like “lost” and “different” to describe East African youth in mainstream schools, notice how Don uses some of the exact language used by student participants in the previous quotes. I probed students and staff about why such daunting words were used to describe East African youths' experiences in mainstream schools. Often, one of the first explanations given surrounded the vastness of secondary schools.

Students explained that part of feeling lost in schools was due to a lack of connection with teachers. Some students directly assumed this disconnect was a consequence of attending large schools with teachers they had for as little as one trimester per year. In large mainstream high schools with three thousand students or more and in classrooms with forty or more students, an East African student described feeling forgotten and invisible by his teachers:

Walid (Somali-American, male, senior): Teachers did not treat you badly... they just would not care about you. In high school with forty students [in a classroom] they're not going to help you as much. You had to help yourself. I'd tell other [East African] students to learn how to help yourself. I remember one time when I was present; the teacher still marked me absent. She did that twice. There were so many students, she probably just didn't know who I was.

In this quote we see a specific example of how youth came to feel invisible in schools.

Several teachers and administrators voiced similar objections to the vastness of mainstream schools and shared how challenging it was for them to get to know their students beyond the surface level. Jane, a White teacher who had taught at a large suburban high school, said that teaching more than seven hundred students per school

²⁶ This descriptor reflects the position the participant had at the time when they worked in the mainstream school environment. Their career position may have changed while working at Kalsami Charter High School, which will be noted in descriptors in the following chapter.

year²⁷ made it virtually impossible to get to know her Somali or Ethiopian students. She admitted that in most of her classes, the East African youth sat in the back of the classrooms quiet and overlooked. She said, “When I can think the Somali kids who were expressing themselves and willing to talk in class, who volunteered and were part of the discussion—when I can think of them by name over the eleven years I worked there—then that means there weren’t very many of them.” Without the ability to “know” her students, Jane was without an understanding of whether these youth sat in silence due to academic challenges they faced, such as limited English language skills or lack of background knowledge towards content, or due to social challenges, such as feeling unaccepted or isolated.

I would argue that immigrant and refugee youth—especially Black, Muslim refugee youth who are often disparaged in mainstream schools more than other student populations—are an especially vulnerable population to be left invisible in schools. As Mohamed, a Somali-American senior, shared, “A lot of immigrants don’t have involved parents and they need teachers watching them—people who try to influence them the right way, stressing to them that school is important... otherwise they get lost.” Seen as “outsiders” and “strangers” due to their cultural, religious and racial differences, and sometimes without parents who know how to navigate a U.S. school system and advocate for their needs, the vastness of schools can be overwhelming.

After describing how they felt invisible in mainstream schools, students’ talk would become more optimistic as they compared their experiences at Kalsami High School. At Kalsami, with two hundred and thirty students (as opposed to three thousand

²⁷ Jane’s schedule involved teaching six classes per day with approximately forty students per class on a trimester calendar, with different groups of students each trimester.

or more at some mainstream high schools), youth described feeling visible. Furthermore, youth associated feeling visible with being valued. Compare the following quotes about what it was like to attend Kalsami High School to the earlier quotes about feeling “isolated,” “lost” and “out of place” while attending mainstream schools:

1. *Magarsa (Ethiopian-American, male, senior)*: I feel like I fit in here. I feel comfortable. Kalsami feels like coming back home.
2. *Abdi (Somali-American, male, senior)*: I got along with the kids right away and started making friends. It was very easy.
3. *Hussein (Somali-American, male, senior)*: The good thing about this school is that you’re actually somebody. Everybody knows you. You can’t get lost in the crowd like at a public school.
4. *Ali (Somali-American, male, sophomore)*: You’re more special here than at other schools where there are thousands of kids.
5. *Zayah (Somali-American, female, senior)*: When you’re known by everyone, it feels like you’re something. Everyone here knows you. It feels like you mean something.

The staff at Kalsami also perceived that the small size of the charter school offered youth an environment where they could, to use one teacher’s words, “truly belong.” Jane observed that this sense of belonging directly impacted students’ self-confidence:

Jane (White, female, teacher): Students feel like they can be themselves here. I think that has to do with it being a more intimate environment. It’s a good environment for them to figure out who they are. The biggest thing is how students here feel confident.

On one hand these quotes by students and staff immediately point to the positive effects of small school and class sizes.²⁸ Yet these statements also highlight how students came to see themselves as an integral part of a school community. Feeling “special,” like “you’re actually somebody” and that “you mean something” are sentiments of belonging *completely* absent from students’ descriptions of attending mainstream schools.

Thus, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the size of secondary school programs was often one of the first points of discussion shared by East African youth

²⁸ The average class size at Kalsami is between twenty and thirty students, less for ESL classes.

when describing their experiences in mainstream schools and at Kalsami. Indeed, it is a fairly neutral and safe conclusion. But as conversations progressed, participants began to reveal more personal, sensitive and complex reasons for why they felt a lack of belonging in mainstream schools—reasons beyond class and school size. In what follows, I explore each of the three themes that emerged from the data, including how participants' felt they were a) perceived academically; b) understood religiously and culturally, and finally; c) received as Black immigrant youth.

Theme One: How East African youth felt perceived academically

Mainstream School Experiences: Misjudged academically

When talking with Abdullah, one of the founders of Kalsami Charter High School, he told me:

Abdullah (Somali-American, male, administrator): When immigrants come to this country, the first thing they think of is education, education, education. Many of them get here and the schools are not that good. The environment is one where learning is not happening.

I wanted to compare this opinion to the opinions of my adolescent participants. To learn what they thought about their academic experiences in mainstream schools, I asked them questions such as, “What were your first impressions of going to school in the United States?” and “What classes/teachers did you most/least enjoy?” I asked participants to reflect on all of their U.S. academic experiences, from their earliest memories of preschool or elementary school to their current high school experiences.

English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. Many participants’ initial responses about their first impressions of learning in mainstream schools were positive in nature. When in schools with large co-ethnic groups of East African immigrant youth, many newly arrived students were placed in ESL classrooms. While in elementary schools, several youth were given extra assistance from East African educational assistants (EA). Students were grateful to their teachers for learning English and for easing their overall social experience:

Sarah (Somali-American, female, junior): I took ESL classes and [they] really improved my reading. A Somali [EA] teacher stayed after school to give me extra help. That really helped me to learn English.

Abdi (Somali-American, male, senior): [In my elementary school] there was an ESL teacher who was very cool. She treated all of us the same. When I would help her we'd go to the storage room and she used to stuff pencils and stuff in my pockets and tell me, "Don't tell anybody." She used to have these prizes at the end of the week and I don't think I always deserved one, but she used to always give me one.

The majority of this kind of positive commentary about ESL classrooms centered specifically around students' *initial* schooling experiences. Such talk is not unique to the participants in this study. In a three-and-a-half-year ethnography of second language learning in a diverse California high school, Harklau (1999) also found ESL classrooms to be havens for non-native English speakers. Youth in ESL classrooms were among classmates who understood the immigrant experience, and with teachers who understood their cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Not all students had access to ESL programs. Before moving to Minnesota, Zayah spent her first year of elementary school in Virginia in a general education classroom with no ESL support. Consider the differences in participant talk between those above who were provided with an ESL program and those who were not, like Zayah:

Zayah (Somali-American, female, senior): In the whole school there was only me and a Mexican girl—the only two kids that didn't speak English. They didn't have ESL and the teacher didn't understand us. They didn't explain things or give us the extra help we needed. We would sit in the back of class and no one paid attention to us. By the end [of the school year] they hired [a Spanish speaking EA] who helped the other girl, but of course it didn't help me. I just used to just stare at people—just stare. They probably thought I was sick or something. I used to complain to my mom everyday that I didn't want to go to school. School was so sad.

Zayah shared how she came to feel socially isolated and academically lost in mainstream classes. Andrea, a former middle school teacher with no prior training in second language acquisition, described how kids like Zayah get lost academically in mainstream

schools without adequate ESL services and what it was like for her, as a general education teacher, to be a part this process:

Andrea: (White, female, administrator): I would have one, maybe two, kids from East Africa in a classroom and I definitely did not meet their needs... The ESL staff kept getting cut, cut, cut and there was no simple way of clustering them and augment what they were getting. When you just have one student who speaks that language, it's very hard to figure out their needs [or get] the time and energy for conversing with that particular kid and figuring out what they need to move forward. You can't develop individual lesson plans. They didn't make progress academically because it was too inaccessible to them.

Andrea's quote reveals both the structural and individual challenges mainstream teachers face with students like Zayah in their classrooms. Olsen's (2000) research supports Andrea's experience, observing that due to a national shortage and inadequate supply of teachers trained in second language acquisition, immigrant youth become inadequately served in classrooms.

Faced with the decision of placing East African immigrant youth in general education classes, like Andrea's classroom, or, if available, in ESL or sheltered instruction²⁹ classrooms, it is not surprising that students are often given ESL placements. While participants with early access to ESL programs initially felt safe, welcomed and academically motivated in their learning environments, over time they began to resist such placements. In a focus group with the Achieve High (AH)³⁰ class, I asked students to raise their hands if they had been placed in ESL classrooms at any point in their mainstream school experience. Every hand in the classroom was raised. When I asked how many students had stayed in one or more ESL classrooms throughout their entire

²⁹ Sheltered instruction offers English language learners access to mainstream, grade-level content while promoting their development of English language proficiency. Sheltered instruction classrooms generally house ELLs in separate classrooms from native-language speaking peers, especially at the secondary level.

³⁰ Recall that Achieve High is a state program that delivers regular college credit courses to high-achieving students while in their own high schools. The AH focus group of Kalsami High School consisted of ten students.

mainstream school experience, all but one hand stayed raised. For several youth, they were placed in ESL from as early as their Kindergarten year until their ninth or tenth grade year—ten or more years. Consider the following comments by members of the AH focus group about their academic status in mainstream schools:

AH Female Student 1: [In mainstream schools] you're underestimated. (Several other students in focus group verbally agree.)

AH Female Student 2: Yeah, they think that your English ability won't be that good.

AH Male Student 1: Even though I had lived [in the U.S.] since I was two years old and spoke fluent English, the first time I went to school they put me in all ESL classes.

AH Female Student 3: Over there [in mainstream schools], it's like, "Oh you don't know how to speak English." They'll put you in some ELL class even though you feel like you shouldn't be—like you should try to challenge yourself with other students in higher levels. [I probably] would not know about most things like Achieve High or scholarships if I was [still] at Johnson. Over there, the students who are going to get the opportunities are the students who were born here.

Female Student 3 shared that she had been in mainstream schools from third grade through her freshman year of high school. Enrolled in ESL classes and without access to college preparatory classes, she became aware of the academic inequality around her. She felt that had she stayed at her former mainstream high school she likely would never have been released from the ESL program, would never have had access to advanced-level classes, and would never have been able to reach her goal of attending a four-year university after high school. Similarly, when I asked Abdi, a Somali-American male senior, for his advice about how to make public schools better places for East African students, his singular advice was, "Don't underestimate students, that's what they did to me; I probably needed ESL [at one time] but look at me [now]." Like Student 3,

Abdi was placed in ESL classes from first grade through his freshman year of high school. Just three years after leaving his mainstream high school, he is now the recipient of a four-year scholarship to a highly regarded university. These comments reveal that even as adolescents, the participants of this study came to find their academic potential in mainstream schools under-valued—by being immigrants and non-native English speakers.

Some youth attended mainstream schools with programs designed to educate ESL students by using “pull-out”³¹ ESL services. Participants revealed how ESL pull-out services negatively affected their progress in general education classrooms:

Abdi (Somali-American, male, senior): In elementary, out of all the students, I was the only one that had ESL. The teacher would come in and say, “Let’s go.” She’d take me out of science class. I’d go to ESL and come back and the [general education] teacher wouldn’t repeat back what I had missed. I hated ESL. I used to lie just to get out of going.

Abdi highlights one of the frequent critiques of the traditional pull-out model of delivering ESL services—that students miss valuable learning opportunities with peers. Magarsa shared how his ESL pull-out experience left him not only behind academically but also feeling isolated from the rest of his general education peers:

Magarsa (Ethiopian-American, male, senior): One of the classes I really hated was reading, cause I don’t think I really learned that much. Me and two other students had to leave [reading class] to go to ESL. [When we would return] the teacher didn’t include me with the rest of the class. Like when she gave us assignments, she never followed up on me. I kind of felt like I was an outsider.

Research supports the issues that Abdi and Magarsa have with being interrupted and removed from their general education classrooms. Pull-out ESL programs are critiqued for causing youth to miss crucial experiences in the grade-level classroom and for

³¹ Pull-out ESL programs, most common in elementary schools, remove students from mainstream classrooms for a portion of the day in order to give them specialized instruction in English. Pull-out programs often do not incorporate the lessons from the mainstream class.

stigmatizing children (Kinsella, 1992; Thomas & Collier, 2000). When grade-level teachers place the responsibility for educating newcomers entirely on the shoulders of pull-out ESL services, the child is often ignored in daily classroom activities. Such programs and practices contribute to the social marginalization of immigrant students and their teachers (Freeman & Freeman, 2001; Feinberg 2000) and have also reinforced a school ethos that casts immigrant education as a separate, specialized school function (Adger & Peyton, 1999). Subsequently, the achievement gap between immigrant students like East Africans and mainstream students may grow even larger, accentuated through the systematic tracking of students trapped in programs which are entirely separate from the rest of the school. In other words, some of the programs designed to educate ESL students in mainstream classrooms actually may lead to greater academic and social marginalization.

Low expectations and low-track placements. When not in ESL classes, participants found that they were subject to low expectations by their general education teachers. Ali, a Somali-American sophomore, shared, “I’d tell my English teacher that I checked out a book for her class from the library and she’d be like, ‘Oh no, no, no... that book is way too hard for you.’” Ali said that it was his teachers’ deficit perspective, more than anything else, which caused him to leave his mainstream school. Teachers’ deficit perspectives about their students’ capabilities have resulted in detrimental effects on students’ academic outcomes (Lee, 2005; Lucas, 1992; Um, 2003; Valdes, 2001). Sarah and Abdi described how low academic expectations of East African adolescents prevented youth from placements that would have prepared them for college:

Sarah (Somali-American, female, junior): Hamdi [my best friend at Johnson High School] is really smart but [her teachers] don’t allow her to take AP classes.

They're like, "apply next semester" or "you're not ready yet." She knows she's ready. Having low self-esteem from a teacher is really sad.

Abdi (Somali-American, male, senior): [My freshman year] they put me in pre-algebra, which kind of messed up my math for college. Everything was easy for me after coming from Kenya. I don't know why they did that. It was so easy.

Abdi, who attended elementary school (K-6) in the U.S. and spent the two years before high school in Syrian and Kenyan schools (7-8), felt that he could handle a higher mathematics placement, but at the time felt powerless to resist his substandard placement. He relayed that it was not until he switched schools that he realized how this low-track placement negatively affected his college goals. Abdi's experience is one of several examples of how participants felt they were funneled into low-ability/ESL classes or tracks that offered little or no preparation for college-level work.

Nearly all participants spent the majority of their mainstream school experience in ESL classrooms—whether for part or for all of their school day. However, during that time some students and their guardians did make attempts to resist these placements, which is within their right. One participant described how her mother came to school several times over several years to insist that her daughter and son no longer receive ESL services. Najima, a sixteen year-old whose parents both died in Somalia, single-handedly brought her complaint against her school to the district level. Eventually joined by several other East African students and their parents, she fought not to be placed in the same ESL social studies class that she had passed the year before. Najima's eventual defeat led her to leave the school mid-year and transfer to Kalsami Charter High School.

Academic identity: Mainstream schools

Not surprisingly, rejections like Najima's, low expectations by teachers and long-term placement in low-track/ESL classes cause damage beyond academic consequences. Feeling like second-class citizens in mainstream schools due to teachers' attitudes and their ongoing low-track/ESL placements, participants revealed that they began losing self-confidence about their overall intellectual abilities and potential. Additionally, several participants described how seeing their East African peers almost exclusively in ESL classrooms made them doubt the academic abilities and overall intelligence of the East African student population as a whole:

AH Male Student: We used to think our culture was negative. You know... drop outs, not educated. (Researcher observed unanimous agreement with statement.)

Mohamed (Somali-American, male, senior): [In mainstream schools] most of my students [students of Somali ethnicity] are put in ESL. I was too. And that probably gave me a negative image toward Somalis— I knew that there were some smart students, but I just didn't know where they were.

Notice, in the following comment, how Ladan inadvertently reveals her opinion about the academic abilities of Somalis:

Ladan (Somali-American, female, junior): I was put into more ELL classes and with more Somali kids, instead of challenging myself.

Ladan's statement implies that being in "ELL classes and with more Somali kids" is negative and guaranteed not to be academically challenging. She appears to have internalized the damaging belief that East African youth—the very community she belongs to—are "lacking" and "deficient" academically and perhaps intellectually.

In conclusion, student testimonials support Abdullah's perception that mainstream schools present an environment for immigrant youth where "learning is not happening." Based on adolescent participants' experiences, not only are East African youth not being

challenged academically, but they are also at risk for internalizing dangerous, disempowering messages that they are academically deficient. Teachers' low expectations and mainstream schools detrimental tracking-systems may mislead some East African youth into believing that they have not acquired the skills and knowledge required to go on to college and/or achieve a particular career and, worse, may thwart students' desire to stay in school at all. In such learning environments, students may begin to lose self-confidence and hope about their intellectual abilities and potential. Connecting the mainstream academic experience to the classic assimilation theory, one can see how these immigrant youth, instead of heading for a traditional straight-lined assimilation into an educated American middle class, are headed in the opposite direction toward an uneducated, impoverished underclass.

As a final note, I recognize that throughout this section on students' academic experiences, I am portraying a one-sided story that omits the explanations and perceptions of the participants' mainstream teachers and counselors. It is not my intent that the reader focus on whether or not what these students say is the "true" depiction of what occurred. Perhaps students' test scores demanded their academic placements. Perhaps their placement into ESL classrooms positively affected their learning, and was undeserving of the low-track status that youth associated with ESL programs. Perhaps these youth had an inflated sense of their academic abilities. The "truth" is not what this study is set to uncover. Any study is capable of uncovering only partial truths. Instead, I want the reader to focus on the perspectives of these youth. The overriding message they send is that they want to be challenged academically. They envision themselves thriving in advanced placement courses and in four-year universities. They want the same

opportunities available to them as are available to American-born youth. Yet repeatedly they tell the story of being denied access to such opportunities and come to find themselves underestimated and destined for ESL or low-level general education tracks.

Kalsami Experiences: High academic expectations

The academic experience at Kalsami was radically different for student participants than their previous academic experiences in mainstream schools. While in mainstream schools *all* student participants were placed in ESL classrooms or tracks for some or all of their school day. Stuck in long term ESL or general education placements with low expectations, these youth grew to feel undervalued, powerless, and insecure about their academic abilities and potential.

At Kalsami, only one participant, a Somali-American junior named Najima, remained in an ESL program. Yet contrary to Najima's and other participants' negative descriptions of ESL classrooms in mainstream schools, Najima claimed that her ESL classes at Kalsami were challenging. As a result of "harder" classes and a newfound comfort level by being one of many other Somali-Americans in her classroom, Najima found herself performing better academically than she had before in her mainstream high school. She compared her previous ESL experience at Harrison High School to that of Kalsami: "I used to be so quiet in class before coming here... I never got an A before in math class; now I know when I talk a lot you can learn more... I love my math class." Perhaps most revealing was the lack of urgency in Najima's voice about wanting to exit out of ESL. Having left the mainstream high school for Kalsami specifically because she

was continually placed in low-level ESL classes, Najima felt appropriately placed and content with her ESL placement at Kalsami.

The other 18 student participants were placed in average or above-average non-ESL tracks at Kalsami. Nearly all students shared their appreciation of these placements and of the high academic expectations that they perceived teachers had of them. Several youth spoke to how these expectations had become internalized:

Ladan (Somali-American, female, junior): At Kalsami, I've had all these opportunities. They don't judge you by the country you are from, but by your abilities and how hardworking you are. They will challenge you. They want you to get ahead. In this school, if you want to sign up for a certain class, no matter how hard they think it might be for you, they're like, "OK, try it." And I do.

Mohamed (Somali-American, male, senior): This school has helped me become a better student. The classes are challenging and I feel like I learn a lot. I actually care about my high school career.

Ladan had come to the U.S. in middle school having never been formally schooled before. After spending four years in ESL programs while attending mainstream schools, at Kalsami she was now participating in an Achieve High college-credit English class with the future goal of attending a university. While in his mainstream high school, Mohamed had been kicked off of his basketball team for low grades. He claimed that he was bored in his classes and reflected that he "learned nothing" in them. Like Ladan, Mohamed was placed in the Achieve High English class at Kalsami. He reported making the honor role the first semester he attended Kalsami. At the time of our interview, he had just been admitted into a four-year private university with a scholarship. Both Ladan and Mohamed claimed that had they stayed in their mainstream schools, they might never have become the academically successful students they were at Kalsami. Mohamed admitted, "When I came [to Kalsami] everything was so focused on schooling, so strict

about learning... I don't think I would be going to university next year if I was still at Hoover High."

Similarly, other students' shared that Kalsami's high academic expectations and placements had transformed their post-secondary school goals. Zayah, a Somali-American senior, shared, "Over here, 90 to 95% of us are people with goals in life... we don't want to stop with a high school diploma." Abdi, a Somali-American senior, saw his peers as having goals that extended well beyond attending college, "We all have big dreams man... one of my friends wants to be governor, one of them the president [of Somalia]... we all want to aim high." Abdi had hopes of becoming a doctor one day, a goal he claimed he might never have had if he had stayed at his mainstream high school. Reflecting on how he viewed himself as a student since coming to Kalsami, he shared, "I know now that I accelerate in [academic] subjects... I'm no dummy in school." Abdi's assumption that he might have remained in the low rungs of the tracking system in his mainstream school is supported by research (Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994). Language-minority students are often overrepresented in low-track mainstream classes and housed with other students who have come to feel ambivalent about schooling (Harklau, 1999). This ambivalence is both the product of both the school's low expectations and evaluations of their ability, as well as the internalization and rejection of such evaluations and of school as a whole.

Kalsami staff confirmed that high academic expectations were an integral part of the school's mission. About graduating from high school and attending college, Jane, a White administrator, said, "We don't ever let [students] think that there's not an opportunity or an option." Kelly, a White teacher, reflected "You feel like there's a

culture of wanting college at Kalsami... it's cool to be smart at Kalsami." An East African administrator claimed that certain students in mainstream schools would have been "lost" to the unknown future of adult schools, but instead were "saved" from such a fate at Kalsami where these youth were given a chance at higher education. Indeed, one of the East African founders of the Kalsami stressed the urgency for staff to stress the importance of higher education, "We have to train our students for higher education, because a high school education is nothing really."

Several staff believed that Kalsami's culture of high academic expectations translated directly to successful academic behavior. Andrea claimed, "[Kalsami's] high expectations—our uniform expectations that you're all this way—have made huge and noticeable differences in students' sense of self." She continued, "That [positive] self-concept is huge for students' capacity to learn."

Yet some White teachers worried that Kalsami's high academic expectations of youth were "inflated." Petra, a White teacher, shared, "So many teachers have to modify the content just to help students pass... I think it gives kids a false sense of what they can do." Matt, a White teacher, complained that sophomore Kalsami students could be above the 50th percentile rank in their class with a 1.4 GPA. Amy, an ESL teacher, discovered that after giving an ESL test to all students in a regular English class, only two students in the class tested Fully English Proficient (FEP). She concluded, "That's not a regular English class... that's an ESL class taught by an English teacher." Amy was especially frustrated by the way Kalsami students internalized these inflated academic experiences:

Amy (White, female, teacher): [Every student at Kalsami] is going to be a doctor. Are you kidding me? I'm all for encouraging kids to do as much as they can to try for high attainment, but I think it's a false construct on a community-wide scale.

This school has a fear of being seen as “less-than” and that’s damaging to the community.

I question why Amy finds her students’ internalization of high academic potential as necessarily “damaging.” Perhaps she worries that youth will face difficult realizations about their academic abilities once they leave Kalsami for a post-secondary school experience. But we must also question whether this is a belief at the root of low expectations of her students. We are left only to speculate.

On the other hand, Jane, a White teacher who taught the highest-performing students in the school, was troubled by the lack of course-offerings available in such a small school setting, “The top kids are not getting the kind of pushing academically; they’re being held back because they’re with kids who really don’t speak the language as proficiently.” Matt, a White teacher, also worried that without more advanced classes, the “good” students might become bored and, worse, ill-prepared for the demands of post-secondary education.

A certain tension was evident between Kalsami school staff. On one hand the (mostly) East African school board, administration, teachers and community aimed to see students empowered academically with the goal of providing them with an education geared specifically toward university preparation. On the other hand several White teachers wanted students to see a more “realistic” and “appropriate” education geared toward their language and ability level. These latter teachers regard the school’s academic plan as naïve, failing to enact a broader purpose of education: to prepare students for all aspects of life—for college, vocational or technical school, work, or family/community life.

Academic identity: Kalsami

Focusing on representative quotes from youth, it is clear that students dearly wish to be challenged academically. In a school environment where other students like them are smart, empowered and hopeful about their future, they too become motivated about their own academic success. As Nadifa, a Somali-American freshman, said, “We have good students beside us, around us, working hard... to have this experience is good.”

Consider the following before/after quotes that highlight how students’ perspectives have changed since their mainstream school experiences:

Magarsa (Ethiopian-American, male, senior): Before I came here I was an average student- Bs, Cs, Ds. When I came here I was challenged. I saw other successful people around me and I said to myself, why can’t I be a part of that? I’ve definitely become a better student and I’m more self-motivated.

Mohamed (Somali-American, male, senior): In [mainstream] school most of my students are put in ESL. I was too. That gave me a negative image toward Somalis. I knew there were some smart Somali students, but I just didn’t know where they were until I got to Kalsami.

Not only do these youth appear to improve their own self-image as intelligent, academically successful youth, but the intellectual image of their East African peer group as a whole appears to be repaired. Once perceiving their East African peers as “inferior,” youth at Kalsami come to be surrounded by academically-oriented peers and educated East African adults who challenge such views.

Finally, looking at school data, when seventeen of twenty-one graduates go on to community or four-year colleges earning almost one million dollars is earned in scholarships, one is left to assume that high expectations, along with other factors, are working for these youth. Abshir perceives Kalsami to be life-changing for students:

Abshir (Somali-American, male, administrator): Nineteen of twenty-one students that graduated last year are going to university. Half of them may have been challenged in other schools. I believe this school is changing students.

Once academically at risk in mainstream schools, youth at Kalsami were given access to capital and a school milieu that supported academic success and, I would argue, inevitably promotes upward social mobility.

What is left to be learned is how these students perform while in their college classes. Are their self-perceptions of their academic abilities indeed inflated? Do they have the academic language abilities needed to be successful at the university level? While socially this academic confidence is indeed a positive experience for youth, are they getting the kind of language instruction and academic rigor at Kalsami that readies them for post-secondary school? These are questions I intend to explore further as I stay connected to the student participants currently attending universities.

Theme Two: How East African youth felt understood religiously and culturally

Mainstream School Experiences: Religious and cultural misunderstanding and prejudice

How religion impacts culture. The East African participants in this study practice Islam to varying degrees and their descriptions of how religion was practiced in their home were equally diverse. Yet in each of my interviews it was very clear that Islam is not seen simply as a religion to practice. Rather, to nearly all of my participants, being a Muslim was a way of life and, often, how they primarily identified themselves. In other words, being a Muslim was not just an attribute of their lives; it was a part of who they were:

Magarsa (Ethiopian-American, male, senior): How do I identify myself? I would kind of lean toward calling myself a Muslim more than anything else. For me, I'll say my religion is my culture. I really don't know much about the Oromo culture and I really can't identify with it.

Nusaybah (Somali-American, female, junior): Being Somali in America is so different. I'm Somali, yes, but I don't know much about my own Somali heritage or background. Yes, I know a lot about American history. I got an A+ in American literature, but that's not who I am. That's not where my heritage or family roots go back to. I don't feel like I fit in either. So I just say I'm a Muslim. I'm more into my religion, that's what I understand. I don't call myself an American. I don't label myself a Somali. I'm a Muslim.

In these excerpts, Magarsa and Nusaybah do not comfortably embrace the identity labels of "Somali," "Oromo" or "American." Like most participants I interviewed, Magarsa and Nusaybah spent their earliest years in refugee camps and arrived to the U.S. as young children. Their Somali or Oromo heritage is something known only through their parents' and older siblings' stories. For reasons this thesis will explore, East African youth additionally struggle to label themselves "American." Instead, most participants find themselves more at ease settling into the identity of "Muslim." Throughout their

lives, these youth have practiced an Islamic faith-centered lifestyle. Thus in my interviews with students as well as with teachers, participants routinely interchange and blend culture with Islam and vice versa.

In the following quote, Zayah, who spent the first ten years of her life in Africa, appears to embrace her identity as a Somali more than other participants who spent less time in their native countries. But note how Zayah still blends her culture and religion together when describing her identity as a Somali in U.S. society:

Zayah (Somali-American, female, senior): I think the last thing I'd say is, "I'm an American." I don't really concern myself as an American. I don't fill all the categories. Maybe one day. Maybe my kids will. What do I call myself? I'd say "I'm Somali." Somalis have so many more problems than other immigrants because religion is so much a part of who they are.

Zayah's final words reveal that East African Muslim youth are well aware of their mixed reception by American society and schools. "Because religion is so much of who they are," as Zayah shares, youth are forced to carry the burden of representing a stereotyped and stigmatized religion while having to fight against it at the same time (Yon, 2000). Mainstream schools become key sites where students encounter the tensions of whether and how to maintain one's religious/cultural identity despite external western societal pressures that expect them to assimilate quickly.

In the following, participants describe a lack of caring they experienced in mainstream schools that, in many cases, led them to leave their schools for Kalsami. Students perceived that their culture and religion was not acknowledged or understood by teachers or in the curriculum. Additionally, they experienced cultural and religious prejudice by school staff and peers. These experiences led to youth feeling torn between the static choice of either maintaining or losing their religious and cultural identity.

Uncaring teachers and subtractive schooling processes. Several East African students specifically pointed to their teachers' disinterest in "who they were" as the primary reason they chose to leave mainstream schools for Kalsami High School. For example, even while Zayah, a Somali-American senior, was academically successful in her classes, the "unwelcoming" relationships with her teachers outweighed her scholastic achievements. When I probed Zayah more about what she specifically needed from her teachers, she explained, "I just wanted them to want to know me... about my life, my culture and my religion." Walid, a Somali-born male who had attended a large suburban high school, voiced similar complaints. When I asked whether his mainstream teachers knew much about him as a person, Walid responded dryly, "Some of my teachers asked me where I was from... that's about it."

Teachers recognized their own dearth of knowledge about their East African students' past/current experiences and their religious/cultural backgrounds. Anne found that having a classroom with students from so many different cultures made it difficult to grasp an in-depth knowledge of any one ethnicity of student:

Anne (White, female, teacher): I definitely know at the middle school I worked at I never knew as much about one culture, nor could I accommodate their culture. There's all these different cultures in your classroom, so you learn a little bit about this one and a little about that one. I remember this girl talking about Ramadan to me. I just didn't have any concept about what she was trying to tell us... like she might be tired [because] she's not eating. I never knew how to meet their needs or [about] the challenges they faced because of their religion or culture. It's like I can accommodate you in my little ways, but if I look at the whole school day, I can't accommodate all of you. I can do just what I can. Sometimes it's like a blanket. I just accept all of you and move on.

Anne's analogy with the word "blanket" is well stated. While she can safely cover the basic needs of her students, the blanket only touches the surface of her students' lives.

Like most teachers' responses, Anne knew little of her students' needs. In return,

participants described that they never came to feel totally welcomed and safe enough to share their cultural and religious identities in school. In fact, students were more likely to encounter, to borrow Valenzuela's (1999) term, "subtractive" processes at work in mainstream schools—processes that actually served to remove cultural and linguistic resources from immigrant youth.

Even in mainstream schools where there were greater concentrations of East African youth and many adults from the East African cultural community, opportunities were minimal for teachers to capitalize on students' knowledge from everyday life outside of school and with families, and to engage them in culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Of the nineteen East African participants I interviewed individually, only two students could recall an assignment where they were asked to explore their personal history or cultural and religious backgrounds in depth. One of those two youth described failing the assignment because she received her mother's help on it—help that was necessary because only her mother could read the Somali text needed for the assignment. So, the one memory this student had where her learning was connected to her home life or culture, ended in a way that was incomprehensible to the student.

For the majority of students and teachers interviewed, the widely held "Multicultural Day" celebration or a specific unit on African history was the only event in school where students could share their culture. This version of multiculturalism used in schools that focuses on "traditional" practices such as celebrations, customs, food serves to reify student differences as well as trivialize the immigrant experience as a whole (Banks, 1993). Such practices do little to recognize and confront the very serious

experiences of racism, inequality and power differentials among groups that face immigrant youth (Ngo, 2004; Fraser, 1997). Additionally, participants made no mention during interviews of experiences where their religion was acknowledged or discussed in the curricula. For East African youth whose culture is often seen as an extension of their religion, a multicultural education that emphasizes secular ethnic identity over religious identity is incomplete in nature.

Mainstream schools, especially those at the secondary level, also appeared to discourage continued development of students' home language. Not one student interviewed reported having the opportunity to study Somali or Oromo in their mainstream middle or high school experience or use their native language to learn. Nusaybah and Asha who all attended mainstream middle schools with large populations of East African youth, saw their schooling experiences as divesting them of their native language:

Nusaybah (Somali-American, female, junior): We're learning other people's languages. We're going to go learn French, Spanish, German, but what about Somali, Oromo, and Arabic? So the language back home, the culture back home is lost. It's like the elders and youth won't even be able to communicate.

Asha (Somali-American, female, freshman): The more you're in America the more you start to lose [your native language]. You're going to start learning more and more English and ten years from now I'm only going to know the main [Somali] terms... I talk to family in Somalia and I have nothing to say important to them because all I can say is, "How are you?" and "Are you good?" No one takes you serious.

These youth describe their disappointment and embarrassment at no longer being able to comfortably communicate in their native language with their East African elders and community. For immigrant populations, like the East African community, who often live in large co-ethnic communities where many aspects of daily life are conducted in their

native language, native language instruction can serve as a bridge for developing better communication within their community—preventing the embarrassment and shame that these youth feel when they are not able to communicate with family and elders both in the U.S. and in Africa. Furthermore and importantly, by offering Somali or Oromo language classes in schools, students would have the opportunity to feel their native language and cultural heritage is being valued.

Youth experience cultural and religious prejudice in mainstream schools. In addition to feeling that their culture, religion and language was undervalued by teachers and in the curriculum, every student I interviewed shared stories of experiencing cultural and religious prejudice. In fact, Abdullah, founder of Kalsami Charter High School, shared that one of the primary reasons that the East African community was eager to enroll their children in a culturally-based charter school like Kalsami was due to the social hostility and discrimination they saw their children experience as Muslim students in mainstream schools. Youth shed light on two kinds of discrimination and social hostility, that of overt, religious discrimination, namely “Islamophobia,” and the on-going, less overt religious and cultural barriers presented in schools, such as resistance by school staff to allow Muslim youth the right to pray or wear the *hijab*.

Islamophobia. Simply by practicing an Islamic faith-centered lifestyle, the East African youth of this study came to U.S. mainstream schools already socially excluded from non-Muslim youth. Yet after the September 11th terrorist attacks, when Islam became known by western media as a faith imposing terrorism, negative stereotypes and Islamophobia heightened in intensity and besieged Muslim youth in western schools (Haw, 1998; Vyas, 2004). Every student I interviewed had stories to tell about the fear,

distrust, and rejection they experienced immediately after the September 11th attacks. Youth recalled how their fathers lost their jobs and could not get rehired, how their non-Muslim peers claimed they were hiding bombs in their lockers or under their *hijabs*, and how certain schools were known to “hate Muslims.” Asha describes how the suspicion and rejection she faced in schools after 9-11 made her feel as if she had lost her childhood:

Asha (Somali-American, female, freshman): It’s like you were having the best time, you were just being a kid, and bam! You’re an adult now. I went from being a fourth grader and wondering where I would buy some candy, to having to watch [my] every step. You couldn’t say “bomb” in front of White people... even the term, “This is the bomb!” They’d look at you and say, “What did you say?” You gotta watch everything you do.

Asha’s experience immediately following 9-11 is an experience we might characterize as a loss of innocence. But even six years after September 11th, East African participants continued to feel disparaged as Muslims due to the continued culture of fear that associates all Muslims with terrorists. In elementary school, Ubah, a Somali-American junior, remembered how “the other kids never wanted to sit with [the Somalis.]” She connected the lunchroom segregation directly to the “hatred” felt towards Muslims by her American-born peers and their parents. She shared, “Before [9-11] everyone was friends, but after that we were different; [I remember] this kid, like on the first day [of school] was like, “I hate you Muslims.”

I came to observe the Islamophobia my participants faced first-hand when I joined the Kalsami Achieve High (AH) class on a field trip to Kennedy High School, a large, suburban high school with a mostly White, middle to upper class student population. Kalsami students had been invited to Kennedy to participate in a AH book club exchange. The book discussions between the two AH classes were a success, but at

break, when the *hijab*-clad Kalsami students walked through the hallways to use the bathrooms, they heard a student yell from a nearby Mathematics class, “Look, there go the little terrorists!” The Kalsami students and some Kennedy AH students observed several students in the math class laugh loudly at the comment, including the math teacher.

Several days after the field trip, an Achieve High supervisor from the university also played a role in the religious scrutiny of the Kalsami students. She wrote to the AH teachers expressing her concern about how some of the Kalsami students had publicly prayed in the classroom and whether the practice was “legal in schools.” The supervisor’s reaction reveals how little some in the field of education understand students’ right to practice their religion. The experience also exposes how dominant society envisions “multiculturalism” as having nothing to do with religion.

The on-going religious and cultural barriers presented in schools. As evidenced by the participants’ talk, youth encountered and continue to encounter hostile experiences with Islamophobia. Yet perhaps even more challenging for the East African youth of this study were the on-going and subtle barriers to students’ religious and cultural practices in mainstream schools manifested primarily in their access and liberty to pray on a daily basis, and to wear the *hijab*.

Daily Prayers. When I asked participants if they prayed in their mainstream schools, responses varied. A few participants declared that their schools did not tolerate or promote the practice at all. For example, Abdullahi, a Somali-American who attended an urban middle and high school with many East African immigrant youth, declared that at both mainstream schools he attended there was, “really nothing about religion.” He

could recall no place for students to pray, nor any students that did pray, “I never seen ‘em, ‘cause if I had I would have joined them.”

Other participants said that their mainstream schools and teachers allowed them to pray—some on a daily basis, others just for Friday prayers, and some prayed only during Ramadan. Several participants recalled praying more often at a certain school or during a certain grade level (primary or secondary). Yet no matter how great the frequency of prayer, the overwhelming majority of participants described inevitable barriers they faced when practicing their daily prayers.

Several students complained that their mainstream schools did not provide them with an appropriate space in which to pray. Muna, a Somali-American who attended a different urban high school, remembered having to take turns during her lunch break in an overcrowded choir room due to lack of space. She recalled how this process resulted in having “less than five minutes” to eat her lunch. Other participants recalled how groups of Muslim friends found random places to pray such as “between classrooms, in the hallways, in the music hall... anywhere we could find a place.” Amy, a White teacher who worked at a suburban middle school with few East African students, described her observations of an Oromo student who did not have the co-ethnic support that many of my participants had:

Amy (White, female, teacher): There was a Muslim girl at our school who was accommodated. She was given a place to pray, but I don’t think she liked how isolated she was. She was a very social person and didn’t want to be different or Muslim. I don’t think her faith was that strong.

I question Amy’s assumption that her student’s faith was not strong. We must also consider the possibility that as an already “othered” teenager (by not being White or Christian in U.S. society), the intimidating act of requesting interruption and leave from

classes and the consequence of facing scrutiny from teachers and non-Muslim peers overpowered her confidence to pray. In fact, every participant I interviewed described how they faced some degree of hostile scrutiny by both teachers and peers when requesting the right to pray or conduct their religious practices, such as fasting during Ramadan, in mainstream schools, for example:

Mohamed (Somali-American, male, senior): [I would pray] sometimes, on Fridays sometimes. Not everyday. At Hoover [High School] people would be like, “What is he doing?” [During Ramadan] people would ask, “Why are you praying? Why are you fasting? What’s wrong with all the Somalis who aren’t eating lunch?” You constantly have to answer these questions.

Even in schools with large East African Muslim student populations, participants described their frustration at continually having to explain their prayer needs to their “annoyed” teachers. In order to escape the scrutiny, several admitted to regularly making “false excuses,” such as needing to use the bathroom instead of admitting their intention to pray. Other students responded to the classroom scrutiny by not praying at all. Babatunde, an African-born teacher who taught in an urban high school where at least forty percent of the students were East African, concurred, “Very few teachers allowed students to pray; there need to be changes.”

Students shared ideas about why their teachers rarely supported their religious needs. Some felt the interruption during class was truly “annoying” to teachers; others mentioned that perhaps teachers did not feel it was appropriate for them to pray while in school. Another common explanation for teachers’ resistance was that some Muslim youth abused their privileges to pray in schools and that subsequently teachers had become distrustful. Participants recalled times when some East African youth would tell the teacher they were leaving class to pray, but would instead use the excuse to skip class.

One participant recalled how this distrust built up and resulted in the school revoking prayer rights from all Muslim youth for the rest of the school year. Such consequences reveals a school policy that either does not understand or does not recognize the magnitude of denying all kids their right to pray.

While students' explanations touched on valid issues, the teachers' explanations of their own resistance were more complex. Amy, a White teacher who formerly taught in a suburban middle school, highlights how mainstream teachers are generally unfamiliar with the cultural and religious needs of their East African Muslim youth:

Amy (White, female, teacher): [In mainstream schools] with different kinds of people and mostly plain 'ol White Americans, it's harder for [Muslim] kids to find a place to pray, and for teachers to understand they have to pray. It's not out of unkindness, it's out of ignorance.

I agree that most teachers at mainstream schools genuinely do want to provide their students with a welcoming and accepting learning environment where students' culture and religion is understood. Yet with little in-depth training and understanding of students' religious/cultural backgrounds and needs, teachers are left helpless and, to use Amy's words, "ignorant."

The Hijab. In addition to facing barriers toward the practice of prayer, East African Muslim girls described the agonizing experience of wearing the *hijab* in mainstream schools. Female participants described an intense and on-going query as wearers of the *hijab*. In the following excerpt, Nusaybah describes the angst she felt in school between wanting to wear the *hijab*—and thus becoming an "outsider," yet wanting desperately to fit in and be seen as "normal":

Nusaybah (Somali-American, female, junior): You feel like an outsider, cause you're the only one wearing the *hijab* and everyone's always asking you about it and teasing you about it. So your main concern is I wanna fit in with the group. I

don't wanna be isolated. I don't want everyone to think I'm weird just because I'm here wearing a *hijab* and covered up. I want to be seen as a normal girl.

Nusaybah admitted that as a young child she struggled with answers to the unrelenting query she experienced, in part due to her own lack of understanding as a young child of why she wore the *hijab*. Her efforts to justify wearing the *hijab* made her feel vulnerable and disrespected. Similarly, Asha, a Somali-American freshman, alluded to how the incessant questioning made her feel self-conscious, "In a group of people, I felt like I was the hideous one 'cause I had to wear this big thing... they all had nice styles and I had to explain myself all the time." Like many of the girls interviewed, Asha revealed feeling both frustration at being continually scrutinized by peers, as well as the beginnings of a resignation in her on-going efforts to wear and defend wearing the *hijab*.

Religious and cultural identity: Mainstream schools

At the beginning of this section, I shared Abdullah's perspective that the East African community was discouraged by the social hostility and discrimination they saw their children experience as practicing Muslim students in mainstream schools. Participants' experiences show that hostility and discrimination, manifested here toward the religious and cultural practices of prayer and wearing the *hijab*, are indeed realities for youth in mainstream schools. Students who remained determined to pray or wear the *hijab* in mainstream schools were often forced to make extraordinary efforts in order to do so, facing hostile scrutiny for wearing the *hijab* and requesting the right to pray, having to pray without comfort or privacy, and being left to fast in lunchrooms while other students ate around them.

Another central concern by the East African community, also perceived by Abdullah, is that youth would actually *lose* their cultural and religious identities by attending mainstream schools. Scholars have studied the negative consequences of complete assimilation as an approach to integrating immigrants in schools, finding that losing one's cultural identity in order to "Americanize" is not an effective process nor does it lead to racial and economic equality (Lee, 2005; Olsen, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). Nevertheless, this strategy of rapid assimilation to U.S. culture is commonly practiced in schools (Olneck, 2004), as was revealed by the East African participants of this study. From their perspectives, mainstream schools were key sites of a cultural tension where youth were faced with the overwhelming task of deciding what aspects of American culture to adopt or reject, and what parts of their own culture to preserve or sacrifice.

Maintaining one's religious and cultural identity. On one hand, East African adolescents face pressure from their families and East African community to maintain a religious and cultural identity that is in direct conflict with western adolescent culture (Berns McGown, 1999). To the majority of the East African participants interviewed, the act of wearing the *hijab* and/or participating in regular prayer is associated with maintaining moral and *positive* behavior. Not wearing the *hijab* and not participating in regular prayer is often associated with "bad," "dangerous" and deviant "Americanized" behavior. For example, Abdi shared his disapproving views of East African Muslim girls who wear clothes like "mini skirts," calling them "Americanized." When I asked him whether dressing/being "Americanized" was a good or bad thing, he explained:

Abdi (Somali-American, male, senior): Wearing a mini skirt is not being modest. That's not in our culture or religion... our religion is our culture. [Somalis who start to become more Americanized] are losing something very valuable. They're

losing their culture... their moral and social values, such as being honest, being straightforward, not lying.

For Abdi, who described his views as representative of many within the East African community, taking off the *hijab* means departing from one's religious and cultural identity and becoming "Americanized" and further leading to moral decay, such as dishonesty. Abdi went on to share his perspective of the fate of both male and female Muslim youth who discontinue their regular prayers:

Abdi (Somali-American, male, senior): All the [East African] friends that I know that went bad—none of them went to the mosque. Religion teaches us principles. In this society we might want to believe that our clothes make us who we are—we might get caught up in buying fancy clothes. That's not a principle—I know that from my religion.

LB: So had you stayed at Ripley [High School], would you be different now?

Abdi: Yeah, especially staying in [mainstream] public schools. Basically, the students there don't aim high. They would ask me, "Why do you aim high? Why are you trying to be that... act like that?"

For Abdi "aiming high" equates to strong morals but also academic success—both of which he felt would be impossible goals to maintain without the influence of his religion. Qin-Hillard's (2003) research supports Abdi's stance that the maintenance of one's cultural and ethnic identity (which for East African Muslim youth is interwoven with their religious identity) plays an important role in the academic success and attitudes of students. Like the youth interviewed, several teachers also observed that the "Americanized" students were far more likely to be disrespectful in classes, get in trouble both inside and outside of school, and perform poorly in their academics. Mary, a high school counselor, concludes, "The longer they've been Americanized and in our school system, the wilder they get... a sad scenario."

Both staff and student participants appeared to recognize the many benefits of maintaining one's cultural and religious identity, yet even so, the pressure to assimilate to dominant culture was great. On one hand, the pressure to assimilate came from dominant-culture peers. Jane, an American-born teacher who taught in a large suburban high school with a mostly White student population, revealed the unspoken "rules" expected of East African students in order to become socially accepted and integrated with White students. She shared, "To be accepted by the White kids is the goal of a school like Madison... until you can become a "Madison Panther" (school mascot), then you don't exist." Jane's observation is an example of how in order to "fit in" and "belong" in a mostly White suburban school like Madison, an East African immigrant youth has to learn and adapt to White dominant culture and discourse. Left to observe White American youths' behaviors and attitudes, their own racial, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are considered marginal. What Jane leaves us to wonder is, what did "becoming a Panther" mean to these East African youth? How did they have to change as beings?

Additionally, East African youth described feeling pressure to lose their religious and cultural identity by their "Americanized" co-ethnic peers. Nusaybah described the judgment she faced from her fellow East African peers due to her decision to wear the *hijab*:

Nusaybah (Somali-American, female, junior): And it's funny because there are a lot of people when they come from Africa who, like, in two or three months the girls throw away their *hijabs*. They think that was cool back in Africa, but it's not cool in America. So they take it off.

And when they see me wearing it, they're like, "When did you come to America?" "I was five." And they're like, "Seriously, you were five? And you're still wearing this? Oh my God, come on! Seriously, when did you come?"

Forced to defend their stereotyped and stigmatized religion and culture, some Muslim youth respond by maintaining their distinctiveness through isolation and social distance from peers (Merry, 2005). By choosing to wear the *hijab*, Nusaybah was no longer seen as “cool” in her school. She became alienated instead and lumped together with newcomers. Similarly, Ladan, who wore the *hijab* and spoke her native language at times in school, recalled feeling rejected for doing so by what she called “Americanized” East African youth.

Ladan (Somali-American, female, junior): The Americanized Somali girls spoke English really well and wouldn't speak Somali to me. They were used to the habits of having White friends. They judged people. Back then I was scared and felt like they were [better than me.] They had their space. I was mostly quiet.

Both Ladan and Nusaybah describe facing a hostile social attitude by their community of co-ethnic peers. They describe feeling fear, shame and embarrassment to speak their native language and pressure to dress and act in certain ways. Lee (2001), in her ethnographic study of Hmong high school students, also observed how the 1.5 generation Hmong youth struggled to feel accepted by second generation Hmong peers. She observed how second generation Hmong students created an unwelcoming stance and separated themselves from the 1.5 generation Hmong. Thandeka (2002) might explain this phenomenon by saying that while both groups of immigrant youth are exploited and racialized groups in American society, the more “Americanized” group is battling with the societal pressures of trying to become White, resulting in feelings of self-hatred about ethnic origin, cultural heritage, and feelings of being different. This co-ethnic strife is both the product of a school environment that does not welcome nor cherish diversity and multiculturalism and yet another way East African youth come to

feel pressure at schools to rapidly rid themselves of their home language and culture and re-identify as “Americans” as quickly as possible.

Losing one’s religious and cultural identity. On the other hand, the East African youth faced great pressure by western, dominant culture to rapidly assimilate to U.S. culture, causing them to question and sometimes deny their religious and cultural identities. Anne, who had taught in several urban mainstream schools, was aware of the tensions Muslim youth faced. She shared:

Anne (White, female, teacher): You see these [Somali] kids just torn. OK, I want to fit in and not be covered, but my family or my religion tells me that I should keep my hair covered. There’s just this pulling. I don’t think they ever get to be themselves cause they’re always looking at the peers around them and feel very different.

Anne’s use of the words “torn” and “pulling” accurately describe my participants’ experiences with the decision of whether to wear the *hijab* or not. When I asked the young women in the Achieve High (AH) focus group if they had ever considered taking off their *hijabs*, all but one student replied that they had. When asked why, one participant summarized, “You see people who are kind of like you and you want to fit in... you also want to be yourself, but when you’re the only one [wearing the *hijab*] and you don’t know who you are yet, it’s hard.”

Participants also pointed out how taking off the *hijab* in order to “fit in” has consequences beyond a simple physical change. One young woman shared, “I don’t think my personality would be the same had I stayed at a public school [because] I would have tried stuff to fit in... I’d still be me, but a different me.” By removing the *hijab*, they inevitably alter their cultural identity and run the risk of alienation from their family and community (Haw, 1998). Aware of these risks, participants reveal that the desire to

fit in with peers is often greater than the desire to maintain the cultural identity that is supported by their family and community.

In summary, the East African Muslim youth of this study experienced hostile mainstream school environments that neither welcomed nor supported their religious and cultural practices. In order to maintain the religious and cultural identity that their parents and East African community encourages, youth were forced to make extraordinary efforts. Some participants were resilient in their efforts to maintain their religious and cultural identity while attending mainstream schools. Yet their resiliency often came at the cost of exclusion and isolation from other Muslim and non-Muslim peers. Instead of “fitting in” or being seen as “cool,” youth who maintained their religious and cultural identity risked taking on negative associations to terrorism and extremism. Given that many participants in this study rarely prayed or completely stopped praying, and that many girls predicted they would have removed their *hijabs* (like some did) while attending mainstream schools, we can conclude that mainstream school environments indeed put youth at risk for losing their religious and cultural identities. Considering the forces at work within U.S. mainstream schools, it is of little surprise that East African youth feel, as Nusaybah says, “pessimistic” about their opportunities, place and value in U.S. society as a whole:

Nusaybah (Somali-American, female, junior): And nowadays Muslims, Somalis, all of us, we’re like very pessimistic about our own opportunities in this country. There’s like a lot of fear that if you practice your religion openly, [you’ll] be [thought of as] a terrorist. We don’t feel like we’re being accepted as much. We want to fit in with the society, so a lot of us, instead of teaching people about our life, about our religion, we hide that.

Like the majority of the participants I interviewed, Nusaybah presents a static, binary point of view in her talk about her experiences in mainstream schools. Phrases such as

“if you practice your religion openly, then you’ll be thought of as a terrorist... instead of teaching people about our life, we hide it,” reveal an “either/or” perception of her acceptance as an East African Muslim into American society and schools. Had I been able to observe my participants in their mainstream schools, I might have had the opportunity to see more instances of youth actively participating in a more hybridized identity. In other words, perhaps I would have seen these youth in the process of creating new identities that draw, blend, and build upon their past and present circumstances. But based on what these youth chose to tell me, participants did not perceive themselves to be engaging in a multiplicity of identities while in mainstream schools. Rather, youth described these difficult experiences with a “torn between two worlds” discourse.

Kalsami Experiences: Religious and cultural understanding

Experiences were quite different for East African youth at Kalsami. Students perceived themselves not only cared for by their teachers, but also culturally and religiously understood. In an environment where they felt free to practice their religion, youth revealed a reinvigorated cultural and religious pride.

Cared for by teachers. In nearly every interview with youth, students’ described how impressed they were with the relationships they had developed with their White Kalsami teachers. Beyond academic support, teachers at Kalsami appeared to serve East African youth as advisors, mentors, and even “second parents.” For example, Ali, a Somali-American sophomore, shared, “Here the teachers seem to be more involved with their students... they spend more time with you... they seem to care more.” Hussein, a Somali-American senior, said, “At Kalsami, teachers want to learn from you.” These

students present a discourse of “caring” about Kalsami teachers that was missing from their discourse about mainstream school teachers.

Other participants also shared Hussein’s perspective that “teachers want to learn from you.” In their former mainstream school environments, students complained that their teachers knew little about them as Somali- or Ethiopian-American adolescents and rarely made efforts to try to know them. But in an environment where White faculty are a minority and East African youth a majority, White teachers at Kalsami had come to experience first-hand what East African youth experienced previously in mainstream schools. As Anne reveals, this role-reversal experience positively affected White teachers’ and administrators’ understandings of the challenging experiences their students face in U.S. schools and society:

Anne (White, female, administrator): I don’t think any of us have ever been immersed in another culture. It’s not easy. Maybe we should look at this as how our kids feel. We’re immersed in a culture and we’re all just trying to figure it out. Working in a place like this you learn a ton about yourself and a ton about your culture. Here [at Kalsami], it’s us learning about their culture and them learning about our culture. [We’re] figuring out how to work together so that everyone’s needs are met. I think every year we get closer on both sides.

In diverse mainstream school environments, where classrooms house youth from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, teachers described being unable to know their students beyond the surface level. Teachers revealed that in-depth learning about students’ culture and religion became an inevitable outcome of teaching at a school where 98% of students are East African and all students are Muslim. Ted, a White teacher who was finishing his first year of teaching at Kalsami (after four years of teaching in mainstream schools), shared how much he had learned from his students:

Ted (White, male, teacher): There wasn’t much of a gap between my understanding of the Islamic faith and immigrant culture and my friends’ &

family's understanding of those things about nine or ten months ago. Now when I talk to family and friends, I'm always clarifying things for them or trying to break apart stereotypes that they may have, and maybe I had in the past. I feel really lucky to be here.

Like most of the Kalsami staff I interviewed, Suzi described students as “very supportive, open and eager to talk about themselves and answer the many questions” she had about their culture and religion. This eagerness by students was initially surprising for several Kalsami staff who remembered East African youth in mainstream schools as far less open and willing to share their cultural and religious backgrounds with others. Andrea theorized:

Andrea (White, female, administrator): At Kalsami, students are able to feel safe and secure because they understand each other's culture. Students can come out of their shell, ask questions, speak in front of others, skills that they need to use in the future. In other schools I think they are scared to do this. They become more outgoing here. You get to see the real student.

But curriculum does not reflect students' shared identity. While students at Kalsami were in an environment where they shared a similar common ethnic background, school staff admitted that little about students' culture, religion or native language was explicitly addressed in the curriculum:

Jane (White, female, teacher): The curriculum [at Kalsami] isn't about the kids. [Students' culture, religion and language is acknowledged during] lunch, the hallways, the conversations... It's about having friends who are like you, whose parents understand where your parents come from. It's that kind of thing. If you're a White kid, living in White suburbia, you've got that. It makes you happy and successful.

Jane and other White staff theorized about reasons for why Kalsami's curriculum did not better reflect students' cultural and religious heritage and native language. Some complained of limited curriculum materials to choose from while others admitted feeling a lack of confidence and “cultural know-how” to teach about authors and topics of which

they had little previous experience. For example, in her efforts to use classroom texts written by Muslim authors, Jane took a university course on Arabic literature. Jane admitted that she left the course still feeling insecure about her abilities to teach the material and therefore rarely taught the texts in her classroom. She admitted, “[The literature written by Muslim authors] is so different than the literature in our culture; it’s so hard to get your fingers on the right explanations for why they’re [writing what they do].” Similarly, a White social studies teacher acknowledged that while he wanted to have classroom discussions about the current political situation in Somalia and Ethiopia, he worried that students might feel sensitive and angry about America’s involvement with war. While this teacher did not explicitly state that he worried his students would blame *him* as a representative American, I believe his talk reveals this hidden fear. He shared, “It’s hard because the information is so personal and comes from American newspapers.” This resistance by Kalsami teachers to teach or talk to students in culturally responsive ways is not unlike how student-participants viewed teachers’ resistance in mainstream schools.

Several students expressed their disappointment that Kalsami did not offer them more academic opportunities to learn about their culture and native language. For example, Nusaybah, a Somali-American junior, shared, “The community sees [Kalsami] as a Somali charter school, but in reality, if you look at the school’s curriculum it’s not different than at any other school... we’re just around other people from that same background who look like us and speak like us.” Similarly, Zuhuur, a Somali-American junior, pointed out that while “outsiders” in the East African community might assume Kalsami “teaches culture,” more could be done at an East African charter high school that

might prevent further loss of their home culture and the subsequent and growing disconnect between youth and older generations.

For example, Kalsami does not offer students native language classes of any kind.³² As Zuhur alluded to, native language instruction could serve Kalsami youth as a bridge for developing better communication across generations within the East African community. If estimates by Kalsami's White Co-Director, Don, are correct and 80% of the student population are indeed limited English proficient (LEP),³³ then offering native language literacy instruction could also facilitate a more rapid and successful English language acquisition process (Cummins, 1991; Collier, 1995; Thomas & Collier, 2000).

Instead of offering students the many benefits of native language literacy instruction, Kalsami provided its youth a linguistic milieu where students continually heard and had the opportunity to orally practice their native languages in the hallways and lunchrooms. Thus, while the school did nothing to promote reading and writing skills in students' native languages,³⁴ Kalsami did not necessarily promote a language shift to English, as was occurring in mainstream schools. Where youth in mainstream schools felt judged and embarrassed to speak Somali around their more "Americanized" Somali peers in mainstream schools, at Kalsami, roles reversed. Sumaya, who came to the U.S. as a baby and was called "Americanized" by many of her Kalsami peers and teachers, admitted that she felt scrutinized by her Somali peers at Kalsami for not being

³² Recall that Kalsami offers students Arabic as its one and only foreign language. While Arabic is the language of the Qur'an, only one or two Kalsami students speak Arabic at home or with their families.

³³ 80% was a figure given by both administrators and ESL staff to estimate the number of students who might qualify as LEP. 52% of Kalsami's student population received ESL services at time of data collection.

³⁴ All nineteen participants admitted to having poor—if any—reading and writing skills in their native language. Several staff shared that, to their knowledge, most Kalsami youth, like their parents, had never fully developed native language literacy.

able to speak Somali fluently. Before coming to Kalsami, Sumaya had nearly lost her oral skills in Somali. But at Kalsami, she is regaining her native language skills:

Sumaya (Somali-American, female, freshman): Now that I'm at [Kalsami], I'm beginning to speak more Somali. I'm kind of being made fun of [by the Somali speakers] when I'm speaking Somali and being corrected, but I think it's better for me. There are important reasons to know Somali. We're having conversations with our parents... and with Somali people selling in the stores. If I want to say hello to my grandma and ask her questions I never learned from her or bothered to ask cause I'm scared, I have to know Somali.

Simply through conversations in hallways and in the lunchroom, Sumaya's language skills had begun to improve, which positively affected her relationships with her family and community. Thus, even without a culturally responsive curriculum or native language literacy instruction, students at Kalsami came to feel a strengthened cultural and linguistic pride simply by being in a school with other youth that shared a common ethnic background.

Free to practice religion. Immersed in an environment where all students were Muslim and 98% East African, students were free to openly practice their religious and cultural traditions. The school provided its students with a daily schedule that included breaks for prayer, designated prayer rooms, *halal* meals, and gender-segregated gym and health classes. While participating in prayer was understood to be an option and not a mandatory practice enforced by school staff, the overwhelming majority of students prayed on a daily basis. An unwritten dress code—enforced by both East African staff and peers—resulted in all female students wearing the *hijab* and all male students wearing long pants and long-sleeved shirts. Additionally, the presence of East African elders sitting in chairs in the hallway, sipping tea and observing students' behavior

provided a watchful environment. Elders³⁵ reported back to the administration, and inevitably to parents, any “inappropriate” school behavior they observed, such as when students engaged in “boyfriend-girlfriend relations,”³⁶ wore improper clothing,³⁷ or participated in prohibited activities such as fighting, skipping class or tardiness.

Once ostracized and discriminated against in mainstream schools for taking part in practices such as praying, fasting or wearing the *hijab*, students shared a sense of relief—even gratitude, especially toward teachers, for the religiously and culturally welcoming environment at Kalsami. Consider the way this youth describe their newfound autonomy to participate freely in the practice of prayer:

Hamdi (Somali-American, female, freshman): What I like about this school is that no one has to remind teachers of things like prayer time. You see the girls rushing to the bathroom and we all know what they’re about to do. In other schools you’re embarrassing yourself with wet feet and looking like a psycho... they’re just going to make fun of you.

Similarly, girls voiced a sense of relief toward being in an environment where they could wear the *hijab* without scrutiny. Ubah shared, “At Kalsami, you can be comfortable wearing the *hijab*.” Ladan admitted, “I don’t have to worry about the way I’m dressed here... I don’t stand out anymore.” In all of these quotes about prayer and wearing the *hijab*, these youth highlight how their religious and cultural practices are not only accepted, but also *understood* by teachers and peers alike. Being understood was something fundamentally lacking in students’ experiences in mainstream schools.

³⁵ When I asked Kalsami staff about the specific responsibilities of the elders, responses were vague. Several teachers mentioned that the school had never explicitly stated the role(s) of the elders, thus it remained unclear. Most staff assumed their primary role was to provide an adult presence in the hallways between and during class. It was widely known that the school paid some elders, while others were considered visitors and not paid.

³⁶ “Boyfriend/girlfriend relations,” a phrase used by Kalsami’s parent liaison, included touching, kissing, and dating. The school also mandated that lunchrooms be gender-segregated.

³⁷ Inappropriate clothing for boys meant wearing shorts, low-riding or baggy pants and clothes with gang symbols. For girls, “loose” headscarves, “form-fitting” clothing, shorts, short skirts, pants and clothes with gang symbols were considered inappropriate.

In addition to attending a school where students could openly and comfortably practice their religious and cultural ways, Zuhuur discovered that Kalsami also offered her a learning environment where she could freely talk about religion. Zuhuur admitted that until she became a student at Kalsami, she had not been aware of how restrained and cautious she had become in mainstream schools toward sharing her religious and political opinions with others:

Zuhuur (Somali-American, female, junior): You can express your opinions in this school and be who you are. You can talk about religion and anything you want. In other schools, you don't want to talk about Christian religion and stuff like that 'cause some people will be offended. So you keep everything to yourself. It's easier to express your opinion to someone with your same religion.

Similar to Mica Pollock's (2004) observations that people in schools choose to speak as though race does not matter, Zuhuur's experiences reveal a common social phenomenon in mainstream schools where religious and cultural differences are also muted. In an environment where teachers and peers feel hesitant or reluctant to talk about issues of religion or culture, the potential of a worsened religious and cultural acceptance becomes likely because important topics, such as politics and religion, remain un-debated and subsequently misunderstood and unexamined.

But at Kalsami, youth felt able to express their political opinions and to challenge one another about their religious and cultural beliefs. Over the months of observing youth classrooms, lunchrooms and hallways, I heard numerous conversations and debates between students about sensitive topics, such as whether a woman should ever become president, whether Islamic or religiously oriented governments were effective, whether a married Muslim woman should have the autonomy to go to college and whether America's past support of Somalia's warlords was responsible for the current political

chaos of the country. In interviews, participants believed that these kinds of debates or conversations would be nearly impossible to have in mainstream schools. Terry, a White teacher who had taught for twenty-five years in various mainstream schools, shared a similar view:

Terry (White, male, teacher): I was working on my laptop in the library when four junior and senior males came in shouting at each other about what it means to be political. You know, things like how to decide what kind of politics you're going to engage in and what it has to do with your responsibility as an individual. This had nothing to do with school, it was just them trying to figure it out. My mouth was wide open. I'd never seen kids [conversing like this] outside this school.

Terry's words reveal that when youth are given the opportunity to safely share their views with others, they are also allowed the opportunity to explore what they believe and to develop a principled identity.

Reinvigorated religious and cultural pride. In addition to, or possibly because of being in an environment where youths' religious and cultural practices were accepted and understood, several participants described a strengthened and even reinvigorated religious and cultural knowledge and pride. From learning more about tribalism and politics in East Africa to understanding specific Islamic traditions as practiced in students' native countries, students were able to explore and better understand their religious and cultural backgrounds. Sumaya acknowledged that her peers were influential in this process:

Sumaya (Somali-American, female, freshman): From my friends at Kalsami, I've gotten to know more about my religion and it's helping my faith. One minute we might be talking about how cute someone is and the next thing we could be arguing about how *haram* this is. We help each other understand things.

Sumaya's emphasis on learning "from friends" is important. As was mentioned earlier in the findings, little about students' culture or religion was explicitly taught at Kalsami.

Additionally, some participants claimed parents did little to help youth maintain their cultural, religious or linguistic ways. Nusaybah shared:

Nusaybah (Somali-American, female, junior): When you come to America you forget Africa. [It's all about the] future, forget the past. Even parents don't push that hard for [youth] to learn your culture, your religion and all that. It's not until parents see that something major happening, like their kids can't speak Somali, that they want to go take action.

Instead, simply through the school's cultural milieu and not from explicit instruction by school staff, students gained a strengthened identity and knowledge about their cultural and religious roots.

Some students shared that while attending mainstream schools, they had come to feel embarrassed and ashamed of their religious and cultural identity. The cultural milieu of Kalsami appeared to "repair" this badly damaged identity. Abdi, a Somali-American senior, declared this reparation process as the most positive outcome of attending a school where the majority of youth were East African Muslims. He said, "Instead of being embarrassed about our culture and beliefs, we've learned to value our culture here." Kalsami teachers, who previously taught East African youth in mainstream schools, witnessed a similar change in students' attitude toward their religious and cultural identities:

Jane (White, female, teacher): It's too easy to lose your culture and your parents' culture in public high schools where other cultures are more dominant. Here kids don't have to be embarrassed about their culture. They don't have to hide [their culture] or take on cultural things that they don't want to. They're just accepted and don't have to explain themselves all the time. They can just kind of be.

Jane nicely summarizes the perceptions held by the student participants of this study. At Kalsami, youth no longer felt pressure to choose between their home culture and the more dominant culture in mainstream schools. Instead of feeling shame about their

Somali-ness or Muslim-ness, they could instead embrace and explore their religion and culture in healthy, meaningful ways. Youth were able to create new identities that drew on a more positive view of their religion and culture, while building upon their current experiences and perceptions of life in the United States.

Negative sentiment toward a protective environment. While all nineteen students interviewed voiced differing levels of appreciation for the religiously and culturally welcoming environment of Kalsami, some youth and some White teachers shared frustrations that the environment of Kalsami could, at times, feel overly protective. For example, several students resented the fact that East African administrators and elders sat in the hallways between classes “looking for [us to get into] trouble.” Perceiving these elders as quick to report “deviant” student behavior to administration and parents, some students likened the experience to being “under lock down... it’s like jail here.”

The “Make-up Girls,” a focus group of four Kalsami freshman girls who many teachers and students viewed as some of the most “Americanized” kids in the school, were the most disgruntled and vocal about Kalsami’s “restrictive” environment. The girls frequently challenged the school’s policies, testing out their autonomy on what seemed to be a daily basis. For example, one Make-up Girl, Sumaya, resisted the unwritten school dress code policy and wore pants to school one day. Her parents were called, but no disciplinary action occurred and she was allowed to continue wearing the pants. Nevertheless, when I talked to her later that day, she had changed back into her *hijab* (which, interestingly, she had brought to school “just in case”). Angrily, she told me, “The [American] culture is telling you to express yourself, while [the director of Kalsami] is saying don’t express yourself—you’re Somali, stick with it.” When I asked

her why she had changed back into her *hijab*, she admitted that the peer pressure had become too great:

Sumaya (Somali-American, female, freshman): I felt so uncomfortable! It felt like everyone was looking down my neck. I wanted to cry. The boys were like, “Look at the butt on her.” Some girls were like, “Look at her.” Others were like, “Those pants are so cool.” I didn’t wear the pants for them. I did it for me, but I can’t stop people’s opinions. If I dress like a Muslim girl, people are not going to think I’m cool. But if I dress Americanized, the Muslim people are going to frown on me. At the end of the day I just wanted to take the pants off.

Sumaya reveals a tension here between acclimating to U.S. western culture or maintaining her home culture—not unlike the tensions youth described occurring in mainstream schools. But in this experience at Kalsami, we see a role reversal. At mainstream schools, it was usually the dominant “Americanized” pressures that overcame the pressures of maintaining one’s cultural and religious identity.³⁸ At Kalsami, Sumaya does not succumb easily to the pressures around her, which was the kind of talk that was commonly expressed in mainstream schools (i.e., “I would have changed and taken off the *hijab* because I wanted to fit in”). Perhaps by choosing to wear pants to school and by openly complaining about Kalsami’s restrictive environment, Sumaya feels a certain confidence and autonomy that is needed in order to resist and contest her school environment. This kind of confidence and autonomy was missing from students’ talk when reflecting about their mainstream school experiences.

The other participants in the Make-up Girl focus group also shared their frustration with the unwritten dress code that all female students must wear the *hijab*. Nadifa, a Somali-American freshman, admitted, “Now I’m at a high school that makes me feel like an outcast for not wearing [the *hijab*].” Hamdi, also a Somali-American

³⁸ In fact, later in our conversation, Sumaya recalled recently seeing a Somali girl at her former mainstream high school “wearing heels and showing her hair,” and admitted, “If I was at that school, I’d probably be wearing what she was wearing.”

freshman,³⁹ was resentful when Somali elders stopped her in the hallway and asked her about her clothing or when girls stared at her disapprovingly in classes. Pointing to her *hijab* she said, “Peer pressure doesn’t end when you come to this school... I might not wear this if I wasn’t here, but I wear it because I get looked at otherwise.” In fact, during my first interview with the group, all four proclaimed their intention to leave Kalsami at the end of the school year and return to their former mainstream schools specifically due to their frustration with the “strict” rules of Kalsami.

Beyond dress, other students complained about Kalsami rules they deemed overly “strict.” Abdi, a Somali-American senior, described his frustration with East African staff after trying to sit next to a girl at lunch. He was especially upset with the reason he was given, recalling, “They told me not to sit by her because it is against our religion... I don’t believe our religion says that.” Abdi saw this scolding as narrow-minded and unfair; he told me that he desires to have friends that are girls “like in other cultures.” Unlike the scolding teacher, a middle-aged Somali man who had spent a relatively short period of time in the U.S., Abdi had spent all but two years of his life in the U.S. Like others, Abdi appeared to be forging a new identity at Kalsami—one influenced by his parents and East African community, but also affected by the everyday encounters with American society.

Participants shared that East African adults and elders were not solely responsible for the protective and, at times, seemingly judgmental environment of Kalsami. As Sumaya experienced when she tried to wear pants to school, Kalsami peers often played an important role in the scrutiny that these youth describe. Ali, a Somali-American

³⁹ Several Kalsami staff pointed out that this kind of sentiment was at least partly connected to age and maturity level.

sophomore, described how “conservative students” spread rumors about any male youth “that gets caught within ten feet of a girl.” He added, “And in the Somali community, word spreads fast.” In fact, several participants noted that this kind of communication and protective environment was precisely the reason parents enrolled their children at Kalsami. Hussein shared:

Hussein (Somali-American, male, senior): [At Kalsami] every little thing is told to the parents. In other schools, you can get away with stuff and parents would never know what you’re doing in school. But here, no matter what you do, I think the parents will find out.

For some youth who had been schooled for years in mainstream schools, Kalsami’s controlled school environment felt confining and repressive—a big change from the anonymity they felt in their former mainstream schools.

A few White staff also appeared displeased with Kalsami’s protective environment. Amy, a White teacher, compared how East African Muslim students dressed at her former mainstream school and how such dress might be seen at Kalsami:

Amy (White, female, teacher): At my old school no one would say anything about wearing [just] a scarf. The sight of hair wouldn’t make anybody scream and freak out. It would here though. Wearing [only] a scarf at Kalsami [instead of a *hijab*] is like seeing a girl sitting under the bleachers listening to Marilyn Manson. This whole “true *hijab*” thing is unique here. I don’t think the word “fundamental” is necessarily accurate, but “radical” perhaps.

Like Amy’s use of the words “fundamental” and “radical” to describe the philosophy of dress at Kalsami, Don, a White administrator, described the belief-system of Kalsami’s East African founders as “conservative.” He questioned their “world view” of how students should dress and behave:

Don (White, male, administrator): We have a growing population of kids who want to be Americans. And I think it’s the job of this school to bridge these two cultures together. We can’t ignore what the [Kalsami] founding fathers want, but on the other hand this is an American school. Students are craving to be treated

like other American students. Students [should] have the freedom to have their beliefs and their dress and not be forced to give up those things [in order] to follow these rigid rules.

In this quote, one might interpret Don's opinion as fair—why not allow for students to have their beliefs and their dress and be treated like other American students? On the other hand, one might observe Don's intentions as playing the role of cultural agent to East African students and staff. Don prided himself, for example, that it was probably his arguments that “saved” Sumaya from being sent home on the day she wore pants to school. He recalled informing another East African administrator that the “law of the land says a student can wear whatever they want, as long as it's not dangerous or disruptive.” Don reveals a sense of superiority in his talk. As Zine (2007) has found in her own studies of Muslim youth in Canadian schools, teachers' and administrators' beliefs that reveal this kind of supremacy invalidate other ways of knowing, particularly those which are religiously and culturally centered. Like Don, Amy also perceived Kalsami youth to be, using Don's words, “trapped in a cultural clash” and also saw the need to play cultural agent for youth. Amy's thoughts on what was most rewarding about teaching at Kalsami focused on how she could change students' ideas about a woman's place in society:

Amy (White, female, teacher): Coming from a Western perspective, [I like] the idea that I can plant in these girls' minds that they can go wherever they want in their future. I feel bad that this might clash with their families.

Amy's language reveals a deficit-thinking model (Delpit, 1995). Under this thought paradigm, the intent is on changing the behaviors and values of the East African students to a “better” set of behaviors and values. This kind of thinking is evidenced in Amy's comments about changing the girls' ideas about women's rights, for example, or in Don's

use of American law that directly challenge Muslim values. Yet at other times, their concern for students' knowledge of American culture and customs seems to be aimed more at helping the students navigate the broader community. The teachers at times were committed to helping provide students with clear messages about what is expected and valued in other segments of American society, particularly middle class white American society. In this sense, they were arguing for the explicit teaching of the codes and norms of the culture of power so as to help the students develop cultural competency in both their home culture and the culture of commerce and academia (Delpit, 1995). On the one hand, they see the students as needing to learn the behaviors and skills that will enable them to get along successfully in broader American society without compromising their own cultural values or practices; on the other hand, they wish for the students to change aspects of their behaviors and values to mirror what the teachers themselves hold to be important.

I occasionally observed or heard about other teaching practices in the school that ran counter to the religious and cultural practices of their students, such as having conversations about women's rights, having students listen to music or draw portraits of classmates⁴⁰ as a required part of an assignment, and choosing literature that explored culturally and religiously sensitive material.⁴¹ We can conclude that these sorts of cultural challenges are not necessarily left behind when students attend a "culturally-oriented" school like Kalsami.

Positive sentiment toward a protective environment. Interestingly, since my original interviews with White staff (Basford, Hick, & Bigelow, 2007), several teachers

⁴⁰ In both instances, one or two students requested not to partake in the class activity due to religious beliefs. They were encouraged by the teacher to participate anyway.

⁴¹ For example, books written by women who had chosen to no longer wear their *hijab*.

who had originally expressed some concern about Kalsami's culturally protective environment had come to recognize its benefits. Andrea had come to a personal decision that it was not her role to play cultural agent, "[The East African founders and staff] get to work out these [issues of dress and behavior] for the next thirty, forty, or fifty years... my job is to make sure that kids can read and fend for themselves." Empathetically, Anne said, "When I start to judge elders for saying certain things to students, I think about how this is their community looking out for them... it reminds me of my grandparents who would be all over kids today to cover up and pull up their pants..." Jane admitted she had gone "back and forth" about whether Kalsami was too restrictive or not, "I certainly feel less worried about it than I did before... now I get what their concerns are, at least a little more." When asked what she thought would happen if the discipline at Kalsami was to relax, Jane replied:

Jane (White, female, teacher): If Kalsami says, "Take off the *hijab*, wear your Daisy Dukes,⁴² do whatever the hell you want to [because] this is America and you have rights," then I think it would be more like mainstream schools. I think the kids who want to be more traditional would have tons of pressure [against them]. I don't know if that's a good thing. If your peers are saying "take off that *hijab*, you don't have to wear it," then you're left open to being [labeled] "traditional" and "fundamentalist," the same pressures they get as soon as they walk out that [school] door. If here they can have adults who are setting that boundary, they can relax and say, "You know what, I am choosing to do this, but you know what, it's also the right thing to do in this little school."

At Kalsami, it is the "traditional" kids who are held up as models of what you are supposed to be, the same role that rebellious kids sometimes play in mainstream schools. And while some staff may view the protective nature of Kalsami as un-representative of life in U.S., these same staff also admitted that Kalsami was a far safer environment for kids than the environment of mainstream schools. Don, a White administrator, revealed

⁴² "Daisy Dukes," a term taken from a popular TV sitcom from the 1980s, refers to small shorts for women.

that there was little to no school graffiti, very few instances of kids skipping school, no kids dressing like “gang-bangers” and no one involved in gangs or criminal behavior that he was aware of.

Even the Make-up Girls, who had initially complained of Kalsami’s restrictive school environment, revealed that they had grown more and more appreciative of Kalsami’s learning environment over time. During my second interview with them, two months after our first interview, all four had decided to continue attending Kalsami the following school year. They shared that they had changed their minds because they wanted to stay “by our friends.” One Make-up Girl focus group participant, Nadifa, did end up transferring to a large, mostly White, suburban high school due to a change in her father’s work. About six months after collecting data at Kalsami, Nadifa called me, pleading for another interview. She expressed how much she missed going to school at Kalsami and that she felt horrible about all of the “mean” things she had said about the school’s protective environment. After spending almost an entire semester at her suburban high school and feeling scrutinized and “like an outcast” for being one of the few *hijab*-clad East Africans in the school, she realized, “how much easier it was to be Somali at Kalsami.”

Religious and cultural identity: Kalsami

At Kalsami, students’ religion and culture was not only accepted, but was understood by the school’s administration, teachers, and peers. This acceptance and understanding allowed youth to feel like they truly belonged and were valued in their

school—for many participants it was the first time they had felt this kind of belonging in a U.S. school environment.

Additionally, Kalsami offered East African Muslim youth a cultural milieu that reinforced and strengthened students' cultural and religious pride and identities. Recall how youth described a “torn-between-two-worlds” experience while in mainstream schools. There, youth participated in a self-destructive process where they came to deny or hide their religious and cultural identities. Kalsami appeared to reverse this process, allowing youth to regain their cultural and religious pride. Youth were no longer forced to hide their religion and culture or rapidly acquire aspects of the more dominant culture in their school. This healing process (my term) resulted in youth having an improved sense of self as East African Muslim beings and also allowed youth to maintain stronger connections with their families and community. As Jane theorized:

Jane (White, female, teacher): I think that at our school they can be more like their parents for longer. These are first generation kids. If you start in the first, second, third grade picking up cultural traits of another culture, and you keep working in that other stronger culture, you start moving away from your parents' culture... it's like a slow erosion.

But others did not see the change as “slow.” Fatah, a Somali-American administrator admitted, “Eventually [our] youth will change and adapt and will be mainstream Americans... but isn't it too much and too fast right now?” Based on several of my participants' experiences in mainstream schools, I would answer this question “yes.”

Kalsami serves as a kind of buffer zone—a school where youth can better fend off the powerful, rapid and (some would say) inevitable “de-culturing” experiences of U.S. society while at the same time maintain, improve and even repair their sense of self as East African Muslim beings. Jane revealed, “We [at Kalsami] want these kids to feel

powerful in two cultures.” Evidence of youth “walking in both cultures” came through in students’ talk and behavior. Their newfound empowerment, self-confidence, and sense of belonging—gained from being in an environment where their cultural and religious identities were embraced and understood—allowed youth to push back and redefine their identities in less static, binary ways. Participants’ talk revealed a more hybridized identity, as can be seen in the following representative quotes:

Abdi (Somali-American, male, sophomore): I’ve matured. Back at Washington [HS], I was pretty-much all Americanized. Now I feel like I have more balance. I haven’t lost anything. I’ve just added some American culture. I’ve learned not to isolate yourself and not to forsake your culture.

Najima (Somali-American, female, sophomore): I’m like half American, half-Somali... in the middle. I like the middle. I think you can have your culture and your religion and language and have the other culture too. You can do both.

In these quotes, Abdi and Najima do not see just one culture as something they are required to embody. Instead, they can engage in a multiplicity of identities, in an ongoing process of embracing, disavowing, belonging, contesting and competing identities (Yon, 2000). We can observe this process especially in the participants that voiced resistance to Kalsami’s protective environment. Simply by questioning their school environment, these youth are in the process of engaging in multiple and perhaps competing identifications, resisting the idea that they must embody only their East African Muslim or American cultural roots. Even teachers’ talk reflected a “blended persona” discourse. Jane shared that as a Kalsami teacher, “You’re not entirely in East Africa and you’re not entirely in White suburbs...you’re learning to embrace that magical and powerful third space between cultures.”

Finally, Kalsami offered its students an opportunity to escape mainstream school environments where they had come to feel fear, shame, and embarrassment about being

East African Muslim immigrants. Victimized in a post-9/11 world, the binary notions of “us” versus “them” remain palpable experiences for participants in mainstream schools.

At Kalsami, away from the hostility and discrimination, instead of feeling the need to constantly defend their religion and culture and re-identify (read: assimilate) as

“Americans” as quickly as possible, youth can, as Jane perceives:

Jane (White, female, teacher): ...[find] a greater sense of peace, become better able to make decisions and to be open minded about other people. When you aren't constantly trying to defend yourself and when you have pride in who you are and who your family is and still have the sense that there is opportunity out there for you then... you can do anything. Eventually we all move away from our homes, in varying degrees, but if you know who you are and are pretty OK with who you are before you go, you can handle whatever life throws at you with a little more grace.

A “little more grace” and the spirit of “you can do anything” were precisely the themes that stood out for me in students’ talk about how they had come to view themselves at Kalsami. Instead of describing their identities in mainstream schools as “a clash of cultures” with America’s dominant cultures, students perceived their identities at Kalsami in a far more confident, hopeful and empowered light. After describing at length the ways in which he had changed while attending Kalsami, Ali shared this representative analogy, “If America is a melting pot, then I’m here to add some beef to the stew.”

Theme Three: How East African youth felt they were received as Black immigrant youth

Research has shown that discrimination is the greatest barrier to adaptation and school success for immigrant students (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Thus far, I have shown how participants experienced academic, cultural and religious discrimination in mainstream schools. Due to the color of their skin, East African immigrant youth face yet another form of discrimination—that of racialization and racism. Over time, how these East African youth are treated racially, on top of how they are treated academically, culturally and religiously, had a pervasive influence on their understanding of their own identity, and inevitably affected their relationships with family and community, their interaction with mainstream peers, their success in school, and their post-secondary education and career goals.

Mainstream school experiences: “Becoming Black”

In Africa, defining oneself as “Black” may be an unfamiliar process. Coming to the United States, the participants of this study recall suddenly being labeled “Black” (Ibrahim, 1999). Sarah, a Somali-American junior in high school, sees White dominant society as the primary culprit of the racialization process she experiences. She shared, “I think when Caucasians see us, they don’t see us as Somali or African American... we’re both just Black.” To Sarah, the color of skin, not one’s ethnicity, is what is acknowledged by dominant U.S. society. Ali, a Somali-American sophomore, shared similar views, “Here, the first thing we think of when we look at a person is the color of their skin—we may not want to, but it happens.”

Participants found that being labeled “Black” in U.S. society was also synonymous with being identified as “African American.”⁴³ Nearly all East African participants resisted this latter classification. Zayah shared her frustration with the ethnic consolidation of Somalis with African Americans, reasoning that aside from skin color the two groups of people were completely different:

Zayah (Somali-American, female, senior): We’re from Africa, but we’re not African American. We’re not Christian; we’re Muslim. In order to concern yourself as African American you have to concern yourself with the hardship of slavery, you have to have been here for many generations, you have to fill all the categories of being an African American—then you’re African American.

Participants recalled that teachers and administrators also commonly assumed that East African students were African American. Walid, a Somali-American senior, described how his teachers at his suburban high school considered him an African American until he made a concerted effort to correct them. Zuhuur, a Somali-American junior, also described an annual experience of correcting her elementary school teachers until finally, in her third grade year, her frustrated parents “started making me wear a skirt and a headscarf so that you could tell that I was a Muslim and a Somali.”

Youth divulged that the majority of the older, first generation East African community held a certain degree of racist sentiment toward the African American community, taking the view that the African American youth population were negative influences on the East African youth. “A lot of Somali people worry about how we might become your average African American and some people don’t like that,” said Ali, a Somali-American male sophomore. In her study with Hmong adolescents in a U.S. school, Stacey Lee (2005) found similar perceptions among the Hmong community

⁴³ In my interviews and observations, the majority of the East African students and teachers I spoke with favored the descriptor words “African American” over “Black,” thus as I (re)tell their experiences, I will also use the term “African American.”

where Blackness (representing African Americans) was considered “everything bad about being American.”⁴⁴ Such associations were frequently expressed in participants’ stories. For example, Ubah recalled that after returning from a two-year stay in Africa an influx of African Americans had moved into her old neighborhood. Observe how she portrays her father’s (and the East African community’s) negative sentiment toward African American youth:

Ubah (Somali-American, female, junior): My dad saw the African American kids at the playground looking like gangster kids. Other [Somalis] told my dad that they couldn’t let the kids outside to play anymore because it had gotten too dangerous. There were so many shootings. Everyone was acting like hoodies, wearing baggy pants that sag. In my family, if you wear pants that sag my daddy is going to whip you. So we moved to a different neighborhood. [Today] my friend [who lives in my old neighborhood] is still not allowed out of the house.

Most of the East African immigrant youth I interviewed lived in lower socio-economic, high crime neighborhoods with large populations of African Americans. Several participants implied that the East African community deems these neighborhoods as “dangerous” and “scary” specifically because of the African American community living there. Sumaya, a Somali-American freshman, attempted to explain the derogatory judgments of the East African community. She said, “If you’re watching rap videos [with your parents] and they see that a sixteen-year old girl has a baby, your parents are going to be like, ‘Oh my god, no Black people at all!’”

Sumaya’s attention to the powerful role the media plays in depicting African Americans as sexually charged, criminally-minded, deviant youth is an important point in

⁴⁴ Lee’s (2005) study also revealed that Whiteness is synonymous with “everything good about being American” (p. 4). Participants in my study did not necessarily come to associate “White” with “good,” as found in Lee’s study. From the youths’ perspective, the East African community also felt suspicious and cautious toward their children interacting with White youth. One participant admitted, “Sometimes Somali parents think White kids are different... keep them away.” However, the perspectives toward African American youth were far more hostile, as this section will reveal.

explaining why many East Africans hold disapproving perspectives of African Americans. The East African community is fearful of their youth “becoming Black” because they are intensely focused on the negative images U.S. society has of its African American population. As Andrea, a White administrator at Kalsami Charter High School pointed out, “Somalis, from what I’ve heard, don’t want to be associated with being African American because they think that African Americans are culturally lacking in areas that are of fundamental importance to them, like family commitment and religion.” Stereotypical racial images that portray *all* African American youth as suspicious and dangerous may prevent the East African community from seeing the African American community as multidimensional. Often living in low socio-economic neighborhoods with large populations of African Americans, the East African community may also encounter and recognize the discrimination and subordination that African Americans face—both within U.S. school systems and in society at large. They may fear that their youth will be treated similarly simply by a skin color that associates them with African American youth.

Racism at school. Regrettably, East African youth experience racist social practices simply by being a Black, Muslim immigrant population. Some participants described experiencing racist or exclusionary behavior by teachers in mainstream schools due specifically to their “Somali-ness”:

Zayah (Somali-American, female, senior): There were some things that happened in school that I would define as racist. Like a teacher got mad at all the Somalis because of a fight that happened during lunch, when it had nothing to do with us. He blamed us and said things like, “Well maybe if *you guys* would stop messing with people,” and, “*You guys* fight too much.” I wanted to say, “Excuse me, say what you’re trying to say straight up.” After class he would sit at his desk and I’d try to ask him questions about math problems. He would ignore me for a long time.

Unlike Zayah, who could name specific actions by her teachers that she perceived as “racist,” Walid’s experience in a mostly White suburban high school was more ambiguous. He shared, “A lot of teachers see you as a negative person... you can tell by their reaction around you.” Both Walid and Zayah came to recognize what I would call “hidden” forms of racist treatment, such as observing that their teachers favor, ignore or react negatively to students of certain races/ethnicities over other students. For example, Zayah resents her teachers’ generalization that *all* Somalis behave in a certain way. Due to their stereotypical racial, cultural and religious beliefs, some teachers have come to view East African immigrant youth as suspicious and threatening. While pervasive and destructive, this kind of hidden racism can be unconscious behavior and often goes unchecked in schools, thereby continuing to persist.

Explicit, more commonly acknowledged forms of racism are also a reality for East African youth in U.S. schools and society. Ubah reflected all the way back to her Head Start preschool days where she was separated from the other children when it came time to brush her teeth and take naps—actions she felt occurred because her teacher specifically did not like Somalis:

Ubah (Somali-American, female, junior): I was treated different in Head Start. There were four of us [Somalis]. We were isolated, like the teacher made us go to one side. I still don’t understand that. We used to ask our mom why we were different. She’d tell us to ignore it. We used to not look forward to school. Usually kids are so excited to go to school in the morning. We weren’t. That was my first memory of being different.

There may or may not have been plausible explanations for the separation of the Somali students from the other students. Without the teachers’ perspectives, we are left to speculate. Yet important to emphasize here are Ubah’s perspectives. But even during the

earliest years of her U.S. schooling experience, Ubah felt “isolated” and “different” from the other kids specifically for being a Somali.

Andrea, an administrator for an East African charter middle school, also described how the East African community faced “horribly racist” treatment at their children’s graduation ceremony by the non-East African employees of the college institution that sponsored the graduation:

Andrea (White, female, administrator): The service workers were mean... they were cruel. They locked Somalis out of the hall. They were so fear-based that they purported that the auditorium was full and it definitely wasn’t. They locked families out who had kids that were supposed to be on stage graduating. And they weren’t just verbally horrible. They brought in the police and security. The security person was walking through the graduation and lurking over the celebration ceremony at the end. It never would have been that way with a different population. I’m sure. With a group of White people standing there, they never would have had security monitoring.

Andrea points out with confidence that dominant, White society would never allow or accept such hostile treatment. I would argue that most U.S.-born populations would resist such kinds of maltreatment. Being foreign-born *and* Black *and* Muslim possibly created a power dynamic where the service workers, security person, and police felt entitled to behave in such an aggressive manner while the East African immigrants remained helpless.

These kinds of explicit racist, and perhaps Islamophobic, experiences were especially familiar for the male East African participants of this study. Their most memorable experiences with blatant racialization occurred with, but were not limited to, the police. Abdullahi, a Somali-American junior in high school, described routine acts of racialization by police. He explained that anytime he drives his car in the evening he makes sure to be “prepared” in case he is pulled over by the police. “Prepared” for

Abdullahi means having the necessary items such as insurance papers and a driver's license, but it also means "wearing the right kind of clothing." He maintained that a Somali adolescent male does not want to be pulled over by the police wearing "Hip Hop clothes unless they want to be profiled." Another Somali-American youth, Walid, described numerous experiences of racial profiling by police toward both himself and his family. Walid believed that the frequency of these experiences was due to being a black-skinned, Somali family living in a middle to upper class White suburb:

Walid (Somali-American, male, senior): [Racism] is not just in the school, it's even the outside community. For some reason the police officers pull you over for no apparent reason. My mom, my dad, my brother, my friends... they've all gotten pulled over. I got pulled over in front of Fit Athletic Club. The police told me, "You look suspicious." Like what's that supposed to mean? But I know why he pulled me over. He had a student with him who was becoming a police officer and so he made me an example.

LB: How did that make you feel?

Walid: The first time [it happens] you're surprised, the second and third time you get used to it. Yeah it makes me angry, but there is nothing you can do about it.

LB: So you've been pulled over by the police more than one time?

Walid: The second time was by my house. The police officer told me I didn't look like I lived in this community. I was like, "I lived here for about a year."

LB: The way you're talking about this is so calm and collected.

Walid: That's how it is in Tyler. There's nothing you can do about it. I'm just trying to graduate and move out.

During my interview with Walid I was struck by the resigned attitude he expressed as he shared these hostile experiences of racialization and racism. He responded that most of the Somali teenage boys he knows have come to expect this kind of treatment from U.S. society. Andrea, the White administrator who experienced the traumatic graduation

ceremony (mentioned earlier), also found the responses of the East African administrators shockingly accepting:

Andrea (White, female, administrator): What was interesting [about graduation night], [was that] a lot of White [staff] came to me saying, “Andrea, you’ve got to do something about this! Call and complain!” And then I brought it up with our director, Abdullah, he was like, “Yeah, I know, I guess that’s the way people are about Somalis. We just roll with it. Keep on keeping on.” I could tell immediately he knew exactly what was going on and also his coping mechanism is “you can’t fight everything.”

Whether hidden or explicit, whether experienced inside or outside of schools, racism plays an integral role in how these youth view both their identity and their opportunities in U.S. schools and society. While some youth may appear resigned to experience on-going discrimination and subordination in U.S. schools and society, data from this study show that some East African youth, especially those who are male and adolescent, are at risk for developing an oppositional or adversarial identity toward mainstream schools and society.

Oppositional identity: Mainstream schools

Scholars have also found that when youth experience racism, Black immigrant youth come to adopt the racial solidarity of their African-American peers (Forman, 2002; C. Suarez-Orozco, 2004; Waters, 1994; Woldemikael, 1989). According to nearly all participants in this study, the East African community has become increasingly aware of their youths’ gravitation toward developing an “oppositional identity,” defined by Ogbu (1991, 2001) as the process of developing attitudes and behaviors that go against mainstream society. In this paper, I opt to use the term “oppositional identity” as I see many of the attitudes and behaviors described independent of and unrelated to racial

categories. However, my participants most often used the term “Hip Hop” when naming the oppositional behavior and attitudes they saw as specifically linked to African American youth culture. The terms “African Americanized,” “Americanized” and “MTVized” were also used, but less frequently. In this section, the reader will observe all of these terms in participants’ excerpts.

“Hip Hop” culture is defined by Beverly Tatum (1997, p. 61) as “certain styles of speech, dress and music that may be embraced as ‘authentically Black’ and become highly valued, while attitudes and behaviors associated with Whites are viewed with disdain.” I also perceive Hip Hop in a more multidimensional way than Tatum’s definition permits. However, I believe the participants of this study perceive Hip Hop the way Tatum defines it. Because I am re-telling their experiences and perceptions, I will therefore incorporate Tatum’s definition of Hip Hop. Some East African youth may be drawn to Hip Hop’s political and cultural expressions due to its ability to confront an oppressive, White, dominant society. These East African youth gradually adopt “Blackness” and the codes of African American youth culture in the formation of their identities (Forman, 2002). East African youth who are struggling to fit in at their U.S. high schools regard the music, styles and attitudes of Hip Hop as important to establishing a specific identity. Schools are key sites where youth are both exposed and influenced by Hip Hop culture.

Boys. Research on immigrant adjustment does not focus enough on how both race and gender affects immigrant adaptation (Lopez, 2003). Both race and gender play a critical role here in the way East African youth come to identify themselves in U.S. schools and society. As with experiences of racialization, participants also acknowledged

that East African adolescent boys were especially at risk for developing an oppositional identity. In fact, without intending to do so, five of the seven male student participants who volunteered to be in my study would later reveal their own experiences with oppositional behavior while attending mainstream schools.

Descriptions of boys' oppositional behavior were numerous and included such actions as behaving disrespectfully toward their families, elders and teachers, skipping school, getting into physical fights, and participating in criminal acts such as stealing and drug dealing. Observe how the identity transformation of male youth toward an oppositional identity is perceived by several of the East African youth of this study:

Nusaybah (Somali-American, female, junior): Boys, they're the ones who take on the African American type of Hip Hop culture. They start braiding their hair and talking the way they hear the Hip Hop music, "Yo, yo, yo... Hey dog, whatcha doin'..." We're walking down [the street] and a Somali boy will come walking down, wearing big baggy pants, gold necklaces, trying to act all tough. My dad will be like, "Is he Somali or is he African American? How can you tell?"

Ubah (female, junior): The more the boys grow up the worse it gets. They forget their culture. They imitate the African Americans.

Ladan (Somali-American, female, junior): Some [East African] boys see all these kids trying to dress and act like African Americans. They come here and all of a sudden take up the culture. They're not taking the good side of African Americans, just the bad side, like drugs, stealing. Two of my cousins had that experience. Now [one of them has] been arrested for drugs. He's in juvie.

These participants' descriptions were similar to Abdullahi's reflections of his own downward spiral toward an oppositional identity. He admitted that during middle school, he "started to become more Americanized." He began wearing "Hip Hop clothes," skipping classes, getting into physical fights and receiving suspensions from school. By the beginning of his ninth grade year was arrested for buying drugs with the intention to sell. He would later spend a few weeks in jail for grand theft auto, and, for a different

crime, get physically tasered⁴⁵ and be given one-year restraining order from a shopping mall.

Youth provided reasons for why East African boys choose to shed their cultural and religious identities and take on an oppositional identity. Consider Abdi's theory:

Abdi (Somali-American, male, senior): There are boys that come here and start acting like the Hip Hop culture—trying to be cool and dangerous instead trying to be who they are... instead of aiming high. It's probably because they gave up on the education system in America. You know? It's more what society constructs, not what the Somali community brings.

Abdi perceives that East African boys become disillusioned with their mainstream schooling experience and he places blame on society's (read schools') fault in the process. Turning toward a Hip Hop culture, Abdi describes how East African youth then turn away from "who they are" (read their religious and cultural identity) and subsequently dismiss their education.

Girls. While the more severe antisocial experiences (i.e., stealing, drugs, etc.) appeared to center around boys, female participants also shared stories of how they had come to identify with an oppositional identity while attending mainstream schools. Like boys, girls found ways to skip classes and behave disrespectfully in school. Sumaya, a Somali-American freshman, confided, "At Johnson [High School] I skipped like two classes a day." Nusaybah, a Somali-American junior, described her own classroom behavior in mainstream elementary and middle school as "aggressive," developing what she called a "rebellious type" of attitude. She admitted, "If the teacher would tell me to do something, I would completely do the opposite and then I would mock the teacher or try to get smart." Along with a history of rude behavior toward teachers and incessant,

⁴⁵ Police use an electroshock taser gun in instances where they wish to stun a targeted subject from a distance.

disrespectful talking during class time, she described getting into physical fights during class and recess that resulted in frequent suspensions from school. “To be honest, I wasn’t very nice,” she concluded.

Hamdi and her twin sister Asha revealed their desire to challenge their East African religious and cultural identity while attending mainstream schools. In the following excerpt, consider not only their actions, but also the language the girls use to describe their past experiences at a mainstream high school:

Hamdi (Somali-American, female, freshman): At Hayes, we called each other Shaneekwa, Shenaynay... you know how ghetto were we? We were like the kids in the Catholic school making the short skirt shorter! We tried to spice it up. We tried to pimp it out a little. We wanted to express ourselves.

Asha (Somali-American, female, freshman): We were describing ourselves, trying to put a little flavor into this whole thing. We’re going to rock it the way we can.

By Asha’s comment, “trying to put a little flavor into this whole thing,” she seems to wish to shift her identity away from one that is East African and Muslim. Using expressions like “pimp it out,” “spice it up” and “rock it the way we can” show the girls’ resistance to their Somali, Muslim culture and their gravitation toward an oppositional cultural code of African American youth culture. Not only were Hamdi and Asha taking on “ghetto” names and shifting their linguistic style to what Ibrahim (1999) calls “Black stylized English,” but they were changing the way they dressed to a more exposed, sexually explicit style—a practice extremely counter to the East African Muslim community’s cultural and religious identity.

Ladan, a Somali-American junior, claimed that sexually explicit behavior was the kind of oppositional behavior most common to East African girls at her mainstream high school. She shared, “The [East African] girls that take on the African American

culture... I think they're sexually active; I'm not lying, most of the girls." According to Abshir, the parent liaison for Kalsami Charter High School, perhaps the greatest concern for East African parents of girls is that mainstream school culture will corrupt their daughters' sexuality. From loosening or removing their *hijab* to wearing sexually explicit clothing to having a boyfriend to engaging in premarital sex to teen pregnancy, parents fear for both their daughters' reputation and overall life experience. Abshir's claim is supported by research that finds girls' social activities are possibly under more heightened scrutiny due to their larger responsibilities at home toward their families as well as the heightened emphasis on their chastity—double standards that exist within many immigrant communities (Kibria, 1993; Qin-Hillard, 2003; Sarroub, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999).

Repercussions. As oppositional East African youth move further away from their culture and religion, they also risk alienation, not only by their East African family and community, but also by the African American community they sometimes seek to emulate. I will begin with a discussion of the tensions observed by participants between East African youth and African American youth.

In every interview conducted with students (and in many interviews conducted with adults), East African youth claimed a more tumultuous relationship with African American youth than with any other immigrant or American-born population in school. From individual experiences of being bullied or harassed, to large group experiences of physical fighting and "riots," participants likened the tensions between East African and African American youth in mainstream schools to that of "war." For example, Ali recalled, "At Washington [High School], there were some racial issues that started up

when I left... a Somali versus African American war [was] going on.” Abdullahi, a Somali-American junior, shared that it was “normal” to see frequent physical fights on his middle school playground between East Africans and African Americans. Abdi, a Somali-American senior, revealed that some of the after-school fights with African American youth could involve guns. Several youth and one teacher recalled a “riot” that took place between approximately seventy East African and African American teenagers. Andrea, a White teacher who happened to live near the school where the incident occurred, actually saw the event unravel, “It was a big to-do, you know... very organized; the kids shed their backpacks as they ran down the street to beat each other with pipes and knives.”

Participants claimed that their mainstream schools did little to “fix” the very visible tensions between the two student populations. Asha, a Somali-American freshman, theorized that the tensions were due to “one big misunderstanding” between East African and African American youth, saying that at mainstream schools, “nobody gets the chance to sit down with one another and talk [to each other].” In mainstream school environments with few opportunities to explicitly learn and value the diversity around them, teachers and youth were left to speculate and make unconstructive judgments at liberty.

In fact, participants shared multiple theories for why such extreme tensions existed between the two student populations. Several East African youth felt the tensions were the result of being continually picked on for being African immigrants. Abdullahi, a Somali-American who attended a diverse, urban high school, recalled how, “Some of the African American kids were really mean to me... they would tease your accent and

say that you were from Africa.” Two participants theorized that African Americans treat East African immigrants poorly because they are frustrated that other black-skinned teenagers have optimistic outlooks about their future in U.S. society and schools. After confronting his African American friend about why “African Americans have a problem with Somalis” his friend responded, “You [Somalis] just came to this country and you guys have the so-called American dream; African Americans don’t have that... they’ve been in the country too long.”

But the most popular theory had to do with East African youths’ efforts to “conform,” “act” or “imitate” African American youth culture. Several youth speculated as to why this emulating upset African Americans:

Nusaybah (Somali-American, female, junior): Somali teens are trying to copy the African-American teens basically. You know, they want to fit in. The way an African-American guy would dress is how you would find all the Somalis dressing in [mainstream] schools. And African-American people are like, “This is our culture, you can’t just come and try to act like you’re one of us... this is who we are, you know?”

Sumaya (Somali-American, female, freshman): [African Americans] might be like, “Why are you trying to act like that?” Most Somalis are ashamed of who they are, you know? They think this other kind of person gives them more respect.

While East African youth may share the same skin color and invest in the music, clothing style and attitudes, they are immigrant youth and do not have the same kinds of cultural capital of their American-born peers. Thus, their lack of savoir-faire toward what is valued by their North American peers results in a lack of “innate hip-ness” by their African American classmates (Forman, 2002). Additionally, as alluded to in the quotes above, some youth may come to lack pride and self-confidence as East African

immigrants in mainstream schools and U.S. society, leaving them, as Zayah put it best, out in “the middle of nowhere.”

By gravitating toward Hip Hop styles of dress, music and attitude and embodying an oppositional identity, youth also faced ostracism by their East African community and families as well. Observe how these youth describe the judgment they faced by their community:

Abdullahi (Somali-American, male, junior): Somali people, people of your own kind, will just look at you and say, “This guy, he’s a bum.” They judge a person by how they dress. [If I’m in baggy pants] they think that you don’t have an education, you smoke weed, you have guns, you drink and all that bad stuff. They harass us, “You shouldn’t be wearing those clothes, you should be studying Islam, you should go to school...” Like, you’re basically nothing. You definitely feel a lot pressure against you from the older generation of Somali people.

Participants acknowledged that the East African community is genuinely worried that youth like Abdullahi will become susceptible to and highly influenced by the negative and destructive aspects of American society. The worry was so great, in fact, that the parents of some participants took drastic measures to “reform” their children. One reaction was to send them back to Africa. Of twenty adolescents I interviewed formally, five of them had gone back to Africa or the Middle East for varying amounts of time. Abdullahi described how his father reacted to the news that his son had been arrested by the police for buying drugs with the intention to sell:

Abdullahi⁴⁶ (Somali-American, male, junior): [After the police called my dad,] he was like, “I think you should go back to Africa—to see how people live over there and see exactly where we came from for you to be doing this.” Two weeks later he had a plane ticket and everything.

⁴⁶ Abdullahi noted how attending mainstream schools and living in the “hood” in the United States seemed far more dangerous to him than his memories of living in a Kenyan refugee camp.

The parents of siblings Abdi and Ubah also took their children out of their American mainstream schools to spend their middle school years in Syria and Kenya, respectively.

The siblings explained their parents' motives:

Abdi (Somali-American, male, senior): My mom thought I was going to be like one of those boys on the streets. She wanted us in a better environment where we could get straightened out.

Ubah (Somali-American, female, junior): We went to Syria [and later Kenya] because my mother thought we were losing our culture. She said, "You guys are getting bad." My older brother had forgotten his culture. He had friends who were gang related. So she said, "Let's forget the older kids, they're already out of hand, but let's save the younger kids." She took everyone under grade twelve.

When I inquired about the effect these experiences in Africa and the Middle East had on the youth, the resounding answer was positive. Students found their East African religion and culture to be "revived" and they learned not to take for granted the education and opportunities they had in the United States:

Abdi (Somali-American, male, senior): [Living in Kenya and Syria] kind of revived my culture, cleared up some things. Life there was very difficult. In the U.S., I see kids complaining about food and throwing it away. Back in Kenya, kids are starving for that stuff.

Hussein (Somali-American, male, senior): All the people [in Somalia] my age didn't have education. They have kids. They're *my* age and they already have kids. They have no education or any way to make a living. So when I came back [to the U.S.] I was motivated to work harder, 'cause I have opportunities that other kids don't have. I came back a different person.

Abdullahi (Somali-American, male, junior): [Going to Somalia] helped a lot. I was forgetting about... I was too young to develop in that type of area and I was starting to become more Americanized. And when I went back, I seen totally different things. People over there, they're good people. They still go to school and do good things. Over here, we have free education and we're making the wrong choices. And I thought about it. I decided not to hang out with bad people anymore. I realized you don't really need to be getting involved in this Hip Hop culture because it will give you a bad image.

These conclusions are supported in other research. Rong and Jo (2002) found that when parents took their children back to native countries, children's sense of cultural pride was improved and their rapid process of Americanization was countered. But sending youth back to Africa was not only incredibly expensive for families but also risky. Youth who went back to Somalia returned to a still-warring country. Youth in the Middle East faced anti-American sentiment for being American citizens during Gulf War tensions. Other youth were unable to easily obtain return visas and sometimes struggled to find appropriate medical treatment. The less costly and safer option for the participants of this study was to attend Kalsami High School.

It is important to note, as can be seen in parts of this later section, that students and teachers sometimes portrayed an essentialist idea of identity and culture. I, the researcher, could certainly question certain concepts in their discourse, such as the concepts of "remembering our culture" or the idea of having "one true self." Is the culture their parents experienced in Somalia now simply one of nostalgia for a life in East Africa that the youth no longer remember? Is there really such a thing as "one true self?" But again, as I stated earlier in these findings, it is not my intent that the reader focus on whether or not what these students say is "true." Instead, I want the reader to focus on the (sometimes essentialist) perspectives of these youth. The overriding message they send is that they want to be connected to their parents' culture and identity.

Kalsami experiences and identity construction: No longer Black, but East African again

At Kalsami High School, where 98 percent of the students are East African-Americans and Black in skin color, race was no longer an issue. Youth were no longer

incorrectly assumed to be “African American” by their teachers and peers; the word “Black” was rarely used in classrooms or interviews to describe themselves. No longer were youth racialized, as in mainstream schools, and seen as threatening or suspicious—characterizations that frequently follow African American youth and other Black immigrant youth in mainstream schools and society. In fact, Kalsami offered youth a kind of refuge from the racist acts and experiences of racialization that exist outside of the charter school’s walls.

At Kalsami, participants appear to return to a place where they not only acknowledged their identity as East African Muslims, but come to embrace it. For some participants, “remembering our culture” was an explicit reason for changing schools. Mohamed, a Somali-American senior, shared, “I decided to switch schools to become more studious and to get away from bad influences, but also to keep my culture.” Hamdi, a Somali-American freshman, acknowledged, “When I came to [Kalsami], it was like, OK, [let’s] fix up your culture.” Several other participants claimed the school had helped them “remember” their culture.

Hussein saw Kalsami as the kind of school best suited for youth who were confused about their identity:

Hussein (Somali-American, male, senior): “Kids who don’t really know who they are can come to Kalsami and know that Somalia is their culture. This school gives them that opportunity, where a [mainstream] school doesn’t.

Based on participants’ experiences and perceptions of mainstream schools—where some East African youth were known to shed their cultural and religious identities and take on oppositional identities—it was easy to understand how Hussein would accuse mainstream schools of causing youth identity confusion. Segregated, labeled, and treated unequally

by their mainstream school systems, East African youth were often given little to no support system with which to nurture their religious and cultural identities. Additionally, participants maintained that East African youth often became aware of widely held societal beliefs about East African immigrants while attending mainstream schools. Zayah, a Somali-American senior, disclosed one such message, “[Americans] think we’re just here for welfare and benefits and that we should go back to wherever the hell we came from.” This kind of treatment by schools and these kinds of societal messages become internalized and turn into East African youth’s own feelings of self-hatred for being different (Thandeka, 2002). As Nusaybah said, “Somalis [come to] see their culture as inferior... we’re just nomads... and that [being Somali] is something you should be ashamed of.”

Facing this kind of external and internal scrutiny at a young age plays a critical role in youth’s identity formation. Abdi recalled his own personal experience of feeling “confused” and vulnerable as a freshman in a large, urban school:

Abdi (Somali-American, male, senior): [At Jefferson High School,] I was a freshman and I hadn’t developed my identity yet. I was... I don’t know... confused. At [a mainstream] school, you get more and more confused.

LB: When do you feel you really developed your identity?

Abdi: End of my junior year. If I was challenged back then I probably would have been defeated, but now I can stand up for myself.

Abdi confided that he was “saved” from the challenges youth face in mainstream schools because, in addition to spending time in Africa, he was enrolled at Kalsami High School. “Instead of being embarrassed of my culture and beliefs, now [I’m at a school where] people cooperate while being different.” Nusaybah also believed she would have

succumbed to bad influences during her middle school years had she not been removed from mainstream schools and placed at Kalsami:

Nusaybah (Somali-American, female, junior): When you're younger, you're not focused on your culture, your religion. You're not trying to impress your elders. You're trying to impress your peers, so you have to be just like them. If I hadn't come to [Kalsami], I would have just followed the majority of what people wanted. I would have been how everyone else is. I wouldn't have been independent. I wouldn't think about my [own] person.

At Kalsami, youth like Nusaybah and Abdi went from feeling “confused” and “embarrassed” by their culture and susceptible to peer pressure, to feeling proud, empowered and independent as East African Muslims.

From lost to leaders. In addition to “repairing” their self-image as East African Muslim youth, several participants shared that at Kalsami they were given a second chance to remake their identity. Mohamed claimed that he “left [his] old personality behind” at Kalsami, saying, “I could show who I really was when I came to Kalsami... whoever I spoke to thought I was a good person and that was a positive influence.” Having “learned from mistakes,” Mohamed, a recipient of a four-year scholarship to a private university, wanted to become a school counselor so that he could help other wayward youth change “for the better,” as he had. Abdi, a Somali-American senior, who had described himself as “lost, lost, lost” in his mainstream high school, claimed that he had become “outgoing” and “strong” at Kalsami. Having become a valedictorian of the school that earned a four-year scholarship to a prestigious university, Abdi was acknowledged that his peers and teachers “see me as a leader here.” Finally Zayah, a Somali-American senior, claimed that at Kalsami her peers and teachers saw her as a “role model.” She admitted, “If I was still at a [mainstream] school, I might have just been one of those normal kids in the crowd.”

Staff also reported numerous instances of youth who had “changed” by attending Kalsami. Helen, a White teacher finishing her first year at Kalsami, observed several boys who started out the school year “skipping school, chasing girls, and being floaters.” By the end of the school year, Helen shared that these [boys] had become “night and day different.” She maintained, “For some youth, Kalsami is made for them... they grow into such positive, wonderful people [here].”

Several students, especially those who had become oppositional in their mainstream school environments, voiced appreciation to be in a school free of the negative influences commonly experienced in mainstream schools. Abdi, a Somali-American senior, claimed that at Kalsami there was “no peer pressure... nobody is cracked up here... there’s no bad stuff that we should stay away from.” Comparing schooling experiences, Hussein found that Kalsami protected him from bad influences and temptations he discovered in mainstream schools:

Hussein (Somali-American, male, senior): [At Kalsami] you can’t hide, you can’t skip over here or do any of that stuff that goes on in other high schools. There’s not a lot of bad influences here. Over there, there are so many people who have different personalities. You see lots of things... kids doing this... and then you might do it. But over here, you don’t have that.

To conclude, Kalsami High School offered East African youth a kind of refuge from the peer pressure and negative influences that surrounded them both inside and outside of their mainstream schools. Several participants were able to shed their previous images as oppositional and racialized youth and take on new images as “leaders,” “role models,” scholars and empowered East African individuals. Such change was possible, participants revealed, because Kalsami offered youth a kind of buffer and protection from the negative “Americanization” forces of U.S. society, allowing them to maintain their

culture, religion, language and relationships with their parents/community. Once lost, oppositional and without much optimism about their place or opportunities in U.S. schools or society, Kalsami offered youth a second chance to succeed both socially and academically.

Summary

Advantages at Kalsami outweigh disadvantages

Participants acknowledged that even with the numerous benefits of attending Kalsami, certain features about mainstream schools were missed. As mentioned in Theme 2, several student and teacher participants complained that Kalsami offered students too few advanced course offerings and minimal access to technology. Several youth objected to Kalsami's lack of after school sports or extra-curricular programs. Additionally, youth found fault with the school premise itself, observing that there were no lockers in the hallways for their belongings or mirrors in the bathrooms⁴⁷ "like in *real* schools." Having previously attended large mainstream schools that offered a plethora of meal choices ranging from pizza to sushi, nearly every student complained about the lack of food choice at Kalsami.

Perhaps the most popular and controversial concern voiced by many participants had to do with the make-up of the student population itself. A few students did acknowledge that while the school appeared ethnically and religiously "homogeneous," students were very diverse in terms of beliefs, values, and background experiences. But when I asked students what might make Kalsami a better school, a large majority of

⁴⁷ A Kalsami school founder explained that there were no lockers or mirrors in the students' bathrooms because the building was originally used as a factory.

youth replied that the school needed “more diversity.” The Make-up Girls’ focus group was especially critical of Kalsami’s lack of student diversity. Asha considered possibly returning to her mainstream school because “it has diversity.” She said, “If I’m around only Somalis, I don’t learn anything... when I go to a school with White people, Black people, everyday I learn something new.” Hamdi agreed, saying, “It’s not good to hang out with your own people too much, you know?”

While initially taking issue with Kalsami’s “lack of diversity,” when probed further, youth often revealed a preference for attending a school with other students who shared a common identity. Abdi, a Somali-American senior, worried that he would not be prepared for the “real world” because “we’re all homogeneous in our class.” Yet, as with other youth, Abdi’s talk about this subject became contradictory. For example, later in our interview, Abdi expressed his belief that he would have been “defeated around too much diversity” until he “discovered his identity”—something he believed did not occur until the end of his junior year. He also maintained that the majority of the student population at Kalsami should always be East African. Similarly, Zayah initially shared, “I don’t think it is a good idea to take your kids to a school with [only] a certain race.” Yet in a second interview two months later, when asked what kind of school she would prefer to place her own children in, Zayah said:

Zayah (Somali-American, female, senior): I want my kids to learn their language. I want them to keep their religion. Of course [the U.S.] is going to change them. They’ll be more Americanized; they won’t be like me. They’ll be like, “I don’t know what Somalia is...[Somalia] happened in the past... I don’t care about you.” Instead of taking my kids to a public school, I’d bring them to a school like Kalsami.

In this quote, Zayah perceives that attending a school like Kalsami helps her to better know her national, cultural and religious identity. She believes this knowledge helps her

stay better connected to her community. Jane, a White teacher, also shared Zayah's point of view:

Jane (White, female, teacher): [We want to believe,] “All races holding hands across the globe,” and that everyone is equal. But how can you do that and have people still be different from each other if they don't know who they are? How can kids be proud of their Somali heritage if they don't know what that is? If they don't know the language? If they can't talk to their elders? I suspect there are a few kids in our school who know more about Somali culture because they go here than they would have had had they not gone here.

Yet White teacher participants also shared concern about Kalsami's lack of student diversity. Petra, a White teacher, called Kalsami's learning environment “really sheltered” and “a bit of a bubble,” and admitted she was “scared for when [students] get a reality check.” Isaac, a Palestinian-born teacher who had lived in the U.S. for eight years, believed the school was best suited for immigrants newly arrived to the country, “Kalsami is a good place for newcomers... for a short period of time... then I want these kids to be full-fledged immigrants who assimilate here, like I did.”⁴⁸ These kinds of calls for more interaction between Kalsami students and other non-East African teens had resulted in an increasing number of “cultural exchanges.”⁴⁹ During the academic year when data were collected, an English teacher created a book club exchange with a suburban school, an ESL teacher created a “culture club” with the specific intention of exposing youth to the “outside world,” American-born teens from a private school provided language assistance for Kalsami ESL students, and students attended a variety of field trips.

⁴⁸ Isaac's comment about his concern that the school might inhibit the “assimilation” of students into broader U.S. society is indicative of exactly the sort of struggles in which the teachers are philosophically engaged.

⁴⁹ Similar criticisms were made about Kalsami in an earlier study conducted during the 2005-2006 academic year. A school-wide goal to provide youth with more “cultural exchanges” was made at the end of that academic year.

Yet in the end, the majority of the White staff interviewed concluded that more important than being exposed to cultural, racial and linguistic diversity, was for youth to experience a safe and caring school that provided its students with a sense of community. Anne, the White administrator who admitted she worried that Kalsami was teaching youth “a life of segregation,” countered her concern:

Anne (White, female, administrator): But I guess I’m trying to look at it from a positive way. Wherever it’s safe, and kids don’t have to have all those pressures, and where they can be comfortable to learn what they need to learn... If that’s to create schools that are specific to one community and that [kind of] school works for those kids and that community, than that’s what we should be doing.

Like Anne, Jane believed that the focus should not be about whether to “segregate” or not; rather, what is most important is that youth at Kalsami are able to “grow up with a community of people who care about you.” She continued:

Jane (White, female, teacher): Kids [at Kalsami] feel [like they are] part of the community and part of the school and [they’re] encouraged by that. I think kids are coming out of this school more confident in who they are and in their abilities than they might have been had they been in another school. When your parents get your friends, and you know each other lives, and you’ve got your own little crowd and the family and community are all part of it, than you’re firing on all cylinders. This school does that for kids. It’s not significantly different than a White kid, living in White suburbia, going to a White school.

In the end, what students missed most about their mainstream schools were newer, more respectable premises, their diversity in course offerings. Yet at Kalsami, these complaints appeared to be more made up for by the value and experiences of sharing a common background with other youth—a school where they could comfortably practice their religion and culture, take pride in their academic abilities, and feel a valued member of their school community.

Chapter V: Discussion

Synthesis of findings

In mainstream schools, East African youth are exposed to the dominant, competing discourses and cultures of their new society. These schools become central places for youth to explore the meaning of their own identity. Some might assume that attending an East African charter high school such as Kalsami High School, where 98 percent of the students share a similar ethnic, religious and racial background, might be detrimental to East African adolescents' identity development. It might be presumed that attending such a "sheltered" school would cultivate a narrow-minded, naïve student population, unprepared socially and perhaps academically for the "real world" outside the school walls. Concern might surround the idea that "culturally specific" schools "Balkanize"⁵⁰ or "ghettoize" youth, isolating them from important experiences of diversity and multiculturalism in mainstream public schools—schools thought to be representative of larger society.

My research shows that, in the case of Kalsami High School, attending a small culturally and religiously supportive charter high school not only positively affected students' academic and social identities, but, in some cases, served to repair "damaged" student identities—damage that occurred in part due to the traumatic experiences that took place in large mainstream public schools. Data revealed how the youth of this study were adversely affected by their experiences in uncaring and hostile mainstream school

⁵⁰ "Balkanize" was a term used by Richard Lamm, former Colorado Governor, in a 2005 speech on the perils of multiculturalism in America. In his speech titled, "My plans to destroy America," he expressed fears that America would suffer from groups of immigrants who segregate and do not fully assimilate with the larger American culture.

systems. Academically, schools often placed East African immigrant youth in segregated ESL classes or low-track general education placements for years on end, widening the achievement gap between immigrant students and mainstream students. Stuck in such placements, youth grew to feel undervalued, powerless, and insecure about their academic abilities and potential.

Socially, East African Muslim youth found themselves in schools that offered them little to no support with which to nurture their religious and cultural identities—identities that were largely scrutinized and unaccepted by teachers and peers alike in a post-9/11 society. Not unlike other research that has explored the experiences of Muslim youth in western schools, the youth of this study portrayed themselves in mainstream schools in very static, unchanging ways—as torn between two sets of conflicting cultural values, in an “us” against “them” kind of situation (Ajrouch, 004; Haw, 1998; Merry, 2005; Ngo, 2008; Zine, 2000, 2001, 2006). On one hand, students faced great pressure to rapidly assimilate to the dominant culture around them, pressure to rid themselves of their religious and cultural ways. On the other hand, youth also faced pressure from their families and community to maintain a cultural and religious identity that was in direct conflict with what they deemed as “American culture.” In their eyes, American culture was non-Muslim, non-immigrant and White. In order to maintain their East African Muslim identity, youth described the necessity of distinguishing and isolating themselves from the majority of their peers. In addition to feeling misunderstood and resented as Muslims in their schools, the East African youth of this study also came to find that the color of their skin assured them that they would never feel as valued nor be presented with the kinds of opportunities as were given to those from the White, dominant culture.

It is safe to conclude that the youth of this study present a failing relationship with mainstream schools. Instead of connecting with youth as social, moral and cultural beings with numerous resources to draw upon, mainstream schools alienated participants, discouraging them from being successful and productive students and citizens. Viewed through a deficit lens by both teachers and peers, youth were perceived as academically deficient, as culturally “different,” as religiously “oppressed” or “fanatic,” and as suspicious and threatening beings. Some participants came to internalize these messages and reflect such images in their own behavior. With little motivation to do well or stay in school and with dwindling faith in U.S. society’s ability to see them as hard-working, honest, valuable contributors, these youth became ostracized by dominant and non-dominant American society, as well as by their own community.

Thus, when judging whether a school environment like Kalsami High School is an effort by an East African Muslim community to “Balkanize” or “ghettoize,” and whether that isolation leads to unhealthy social development, we must give considerable attention to the way these youth feel positioned by their mainstream schools. When marginalized groups are “othered” by dominant society, it is not without surprise that they too might return an equally distancing gaze (Zine, 2007). The binary notions of “us” versus “them” that participants revealed were associated with *mainstream* school experiences, not Kalsami experiences. Mainstream schools, as perceived by all participants of this study, were *not* ideologically neutral spaces. Rather, mainstream schools clearly affirmed particular identities (i.e., White/dominant culture) and invalidated others, especially students’ religiously centered and racial identities. In addition to being “othered” by mainstream schools, youth also found themselves at risk

of being “de-cultured.” Values of individualism replaced values of communal and familial responsibility; values of “Americanized” behavior that legitimize pre-marital dating, sex, alcohol and drug use, replaced strong faith and moral values, and so on (Berns-McGown, 1999; Zine, 2001, 2007). Not only does the “de-culturing” process of mainstream schools negatively affect youth’s relationships with their parents and community, but losing one’s ethnic identity has also been found to lead to downward social mobility (Qin-Hillard, 2003). It seems that it is mainstream schools, rather than a ‘separate’ environment like Kalsami, that creates the kind of student population that is unprepared for the “real world” outside the school walls.

Contrary to the negative accusations surrounding the “Balkanization” or “ghettoization” of students, data from this study reveals that Kalsami High School promoted positive socialization where students were able to build a good self-concept and find comfort in who they are as East African immigrants, as Muslims, and as American citizens. By attending a school that was supportive of and sensitive to students’ cultural and religious practices and where students were among others who shared a common identity, youth at Kalsami were able to maintain their faith and moral values, their ties to their family and community, *and* develop confidence in their abilities to become full and equal members of U.S. society. In other words, the school appeared to serve as a kind of buffer between the values, beliefs and practices of their culture and the once-overwhelming process of trying to fit in with the dominant society. This buffer served to slow down the pressure on youth to rapidly assimilate into the more dominant culture of mainstream schools. Youth came to feel confident and secure in adopting multiple, flexible identities, and better able to challenge and assert themselves in U.S. society.

Ultimately, mainstream schools, acting as cultural agents, appeared to *change* behaviors of East African youth to the behaviors and values of dominant culture. In expecting these youth to fully assimilate to the dominant culture, these schools participated in a subtractive process (Valenzuela, 1999) that transformed East African youth into marginalized, monolingual English-speaking, ethnic minorities—neither identified with East Africa or Islam nor equipped to function competently in America’s mainstream. In some ways, Kalsami also served to subtract certain resources from youth. By not offering classes in students’ native languages, students’ literacy skills in these languages continued to depreciate. With little curricular emphasis on East African history, literature or culture, students are denied valuable perspectives and knowledge.

Yet even with these faults, simply by offering youth a school environment that was both supportive of and sensitive to students’ cultural and religious practices and where students were among others who shared a common background, Kalsami acted as a *bridge* to help youth develop behaviors and skills necessary in both their home culture and in the “culture of power” (Delpit, 1996). Youth were able to acculturate without complete assimilation, thus acquiring new skills—like learning English and participating in the American process—but on their own terms and at their own pace. Youth could add to their cultural identity the positive aspects of American society they so desired to add. To return to a representative quote by a student-participant that highlights this point, “If America is a melting pot, I’m going to add a little beef to the stew.”

Implications

First and foremost, the results of this study reveal that, for the case of Kalsami High School, there are many positive outcomes of attending a culturally specific school. While we cannot generalize that all culturally specific schools will produce the same outcomes as Kalsami, these findings suggest that educators should give more consideration to these kinds of schools. While almost all adolescents face a varying amount of social pressure in school, some youth, especially immigrant youth like the East African Muslim participants of this study, face even greater pressures that include academic, religious, cultural, and racial misunderstanding and discrimination. These additional pressures put youth at great risk for academic failure, social alienation, and oppositional behavior. As this study concludes, culturally specific schools may alleviate some of these pressures upon students. In doing so, schools would help youth to develop the skills and confidence needed to better navigate U.S. society. Serving as a kind of “buffer zone,” these schools may provide a culturally congruent space where youth can develop a strong *bicultural* identity: where they can maintain their cultural and religious identity, and at the same time explore American culture and acquire the skills they need to function successfully in society.

By embracing an “additive” educational approach that builds on the interests of the community they serve, culturally specific schools have the potential to help students achieve a better sense of self, purpose and identity with which to make the right choices both inside and outside of school. In the end, I believe that the success of schools should be judged first and foremost on the character of the human being that they help to produce. In the case of Kalsami, a culturally specific school not only produced positive,

productive American citizens, but also repaired the previous damage that occurred in mainstream schools. Thus, it is this researcher's opinion that culturally specific schools must be examined and considered as viable and important schooling options for immigrant youth.

But it is not my intention to simply reveal the benefits of culturally specific schools for immigrant youth. Mainstream schools should not be allowed to remain status quo. Can mainstream schools ever offer a similarly supportive and secure environment? Perhaps not, but I believe there are several implications from this study that mainstream schools *and* schools like Kalsami High School should consider in order to improve the school experience of immigrant minority youth.

To begin, educators must first recognize that when youth feel victimized in their schools—facing prejudice and discrimination, they are at risk for internalizing these feelings of oppression and resentment. These feelings inevitably become problematic for positive identity development and engagement in schooling. As has been found in other research (Qin-Hillard, 2003) and in this dissertation study, boys are more likely to be negatively influenced by their friends and by the urban realities surrounding them in schools. Researchers, teachers, and policy makers need to be aware of the important role that gender differences play in school adaptation so that they may better address the challenges immigrant youth face.

Kalsami High School provided several invaluable experiences missing from some participants' experiences in mainstream schools. In a small school of roughly 230 students, youth reported feeling visible and known by teachers and peers alike. Bad influences, in the form of peer pressure or in the form of urban vices, were purposefully

kept at bay, in part as a consequence of the more intimate environment, and in part as a result of Kalsami's "controlled" and "strict" school environment. Youth were in a "safe" environment where they were carefully watched by East African elders in the hallway and where any inappropriate school behavior was immediately reported—not just to administration, but also to parents. Mainstream schools need to do a better job of offering refuge, protection, and guidance to youth, seeking out ways to provide in-house mentoring and intervention programs that are specifically designed to help immigrant boys and girls focus on school and protect youth from negative influences (Qin, 2006). Hiring more teachers and school staff of similar ethnic/religious backgrounds would certainly help in efforts to provide a more inclusive and nurturing school environment. Consideration should also be given to school size, as participants revealed that they were not always able to handle the independence they experienced when attending large high schools of three thousand students or more. Findings from this study should serve to further inform the debate that supports small school size at the secondary level.

As the participants of this study pointed out, rarely was their ethnicity or experience as immigrants ever acknowledged in their mainstream classrooms; even at Kalsami, the focus of the curriculum in all subject areas largely ignored the experiences and voices of East African individuals or groups. Such curricular practices, according to Banks (1993, p. 195), not only reinforces a false sense of superiority, giving youth a misleading conception of their relationship with other racial and ethnic groups, but it also denies *all* youth the benefit of perspectives and knowledge that can be gained from studying other cultures and groups. When participants did recall experiences in school where their culture or nationality was acknowledged, these experiences of learning about

“other cultures” were generally celebratory in nature, focusing on “traditional” practices such as food, entertainment, and customs. This kind of curricula trivializes immigrant youths’ life experiences, not taking into account immigrant students’ wide range of experiences. Additionally, such curricula serve to reinforce difference. By focusing on difference we can give power to dissent.

Schools need to find more inclusive frameworks, moving beyond superficial ways of viewing immigrant youth. Teachers must learn—to borrow Delpit’s (1992, p. 248) words—“about the brilliance students bring with them in their blood.” When schools make efforts to genuinely understand the diverse social, cultural, linguistic and religious aspects of their students, schools are more likely to find their immigrant students successful both academically and socially. This means creating opportunities to expose the *shared* values and *common* ground between groups of peoples, regardless of our different cultural, religious, and racial backgrounds. Additionally and importantly, this also means looking at “Muslim identity” or, in this case, “Somali identity” not as monolithic and/or static in nature, but as dynamic, diverse, and ever-changing.

Yet while emphasizing the shared common ground between all youth, we can not pretend that inequality and injustice does not exist in our schools and society. Ngo (2004) suggests that cultural difference must be conceived as “political” and that the teaching of cultural difference should “engage students (and teachers) in uncomfortable spaces and practices that critically examine the construction of difference” (p. 148). Willinsky (1998) suggests a critical space strategy, where teachers and students investigate the biases, stereotypes and generalities around them and work together to counter them. Educators must acknowledge the inequalities and injustices that exist in

school and in society, and in their classrooms, explicitly address the real and on-going struggles diverse, non-dominant youth face in society, such as subordination, racism and other forms of discrimination. For Black immigrant youth, we must expose, for example, why it is these youth are “lumped” with African Americans and less likely to be asked about their cultural backgrounds than other immigrants (Rong & Jo, 2002). Additionally, we must change our curricular practices in order to help Black immigrant youth rediscover their origins, pride, and shared common experiences (Rong & Brown, 2002). Instead of focusing only on the history of native-born Black Americans, for example, educators must do a better job of including the history of youth from East Africa and other African nations.

But even when educators and teacher-educators attempt to “get political,” they often continue to emphasize a secular ethnic identity, leaving out the “uncomfortable” dimension of students’ religious differences (Lippy, 2004; Subedi, 2006). Educators and teacher-educators need to recognize that one very important source of social capital that East African Muslim immigrant youth bring with them to school is their ethnic and religious identity. Qin-Hillard (2003) found that ethnic identity acts as a “shield” to protect immigrant youth from the negative influences around them. Yet for youth whose culture is seen to be an expression of their religion, mainstream schools present culture in a shallow, insincere way. As the participants of this study pointed out, rarely was their religion or culture ever acknowledged in the curricula. While some schools attempted to accommodate religious practices, few students or teachers appeared to understand these practices, which often resulted in ignorant or Islamophobic reactions. For example, participants recalled how some schools might offer youth a place to pray, but that

teachers were suspicious or reluctant to allow youth time away from class in which to pray. Students were allowed to wear the *hijab*, but not protected from the scrutiny they faced by peers for doing so. In this kind of a school environment, East African youth struggled to maintain their cultural and religious identities. Kalsami High School was, in part, a direct response to the East African Muslim community's frustration with mainstream schools' inability to accommodate and respect the religious and cultural needs of their youth.

Thus, there is a critical need for educators to engage in a meaningful dialogue that respects and educates about all cultures, 'races' *and* religions. To begin this process, schools must acknowledge the grievances felt by a religious community that is often the target of prejudice and stereotyping. Gilbert (2004) points out that religion has largely been ignored in most discussions about institutional racism. In order to counter discrimination like Islamophobia, individuals must be held responsible for their attitudes and beliefs, and discriminatory practices must be made visible. No longer can we remain silent and complacent about issues that matter. Just as Pollock (2004) calls for educators to participate in the everyday act of talking about racial diversity, I would add that educators should expand these conversations to include religious and cultural diversity and their intersections. For the educators of East African Muslim youth, that means having on-going conversations with students to better understand what Islam is, to become aware of the difficult experiences these youth face in U.S. schools and society, and to develop inclusive practices that promote tolerance and understanding.

Shaheen Azmi, whose research focuses on private Islamic schools in Canada, calls for secular schools to provide an "educational curriculum, program and policy

development that accurately reflects the *full spectrum* of Muslim outlooks on religion, society, and public education and which proactively seeks to provide *reasonable* accommodation where needed and where possible” (2001, p. 272, emphases mine).

Azmi’s use of the word “reasonable” is important as this statement calls our attention to the complicated and controversial issues involved with presenting a version of multiculturalism that includes the outlook of more traditionally religious Muslims. Azmi points out how conservative Muslims in Toronto, not unlike some East African Muslims in Allenberg, have taken issue with the Toronto Board of Education’s policy affirmation of ‘equity’:

Issues such as gender integration for women are seen by many as the denial of religiously prescribed gender roles and rules of modest dress and conduct. Casual discussion of sexuality and/or the notion of the normality of homosexuality are unacceptable to Muslims who adhere to the religious tradition. These curriculum items along with a cultural environment that allows for free mixing of sexes and open expression of sexuality is deemed by many as a threat to Muslim children, undermining the Islamic identities of their children (Azmi, 2001, p. 264).

Adhering to certain religious values and beliefs of more traditionally religious Muslims may run contrary to the ideal vision of multicultural education—a vision that not only calls for teachers to teach “awareness” and “tolerance” of, for example, difference in “lifestyle,” but also calls for classrooms to examine the harm of homophobia and heterosexism (Ngo, 2004, p.147). While on one hand more conservative Muslim communities call out for a school culture that acknowledges and supports their religion, are they also willing to allow for the rights of other marginalized groups, like homosexuals, whose way of life is unacceptable to a strictly religious Muslim tradition? For some, a version of multiculturalism that includes Islam’s restrictions might appear impossible in secular public schools. Thus the development of “culturally-oriented”

schools like Kalsami may prove a necessary route to provide institutional plurality. Even though the school is secular, a culturally- and religiously- cohesive charter school like Kalsami may be preferred over mainstream schools due to what the school *does not* teach. In the end, this is a question that must be part of a productive dialogue between mainstream schools and groups of peoples (Muslims, fundamentalist Christians, etc.) whose religion is an integral part of their identity.

Ultimately, the goal of educators must be to strengthen a *multicultural* national and global identity where youth are able to maintain attachments to both their cultural communities as well as participate effectively in a shared national culture (Banks, 2003) and global perspective (Zine, 2000). As Banks eloquently states (p. 2):

Unity without diversity results in cultural repression and hegemony. Diversity without unity leads to Balkanization and to fracturing of the nation-state. Diversity and unity should coexist in a delicate balance in a democratic multicultural nation-state. Citizenship education should help students to develop thoughtful and clarified identifications with their cultural communities and their nation-states. Non-reflective and unexamined cultural attachments may prevent the development of a cohesive nation with clearly defined national goals and policies.

This quote returns us to the importance of students developing an identity that not only reflects upon their cultural and religious commitments but also to the ideals of the nation and world. Schools are representative of society at large and must facilitate youth in the process of developing into productive and thoughtful global citizens. A “delicate balance” means that this is difficult to achieve, but it must be tried.

Limitations

I had the rich experience of observing students for an entire school year, but only while they attended Kalsami High School. My sample did not include those who stayed

and thrived at their mainstream schools. Interviewing students about their mainstream school experiences *after* they transferred may have increased the possibility of selective memory on the part of the interviewees. That said, experiencing Kalsami after experiencing mainstream schools undoubtedly helped youth become more aware of the culture of their former schools; nothing reveals your former experiences in a certain setting as much as experiencing a new setting. While I believe there is much to be learned from what participants choose to remember and share, the data must be viewed within the context they were gathered.

Additionally, in order to evaluate Kalsami's academic and social influences on youth, it would have been helpful to observe recently graduated participants as they attend universities. By doing so, I might have been better able to analyze how well students were academically prepared for the rigors of university, whether the academic expectations of youth at Kalsami were unrealistic and/or inflated, and how participants felt their experience at Kalsami affected their post-secondary social experience.

Implications for Further Research

In general, charter schools are a poorly-studied form of educational reform (Greene, Forster, & Winters, 2003). Charter schools that target certain student populations are a growing phenomenon, but even less is known about these schools. While this study provided an in-depth look at one culturally specific charter high school that targets East African Muslim youth, it would be meaningful to continue to study these kinds of schools and draw fair comparisons between them.

Additionally, some mainstream schools are proving successful in their efforts toward implementing a more inclusive school environment for Black immigrant Muslim youth. These schools' progressive efforts should be studied from the perspectives of the students, their parents, and the school staff. For example, more research should be conducted from the viewpoint of immigrant youth themselves on the meaning of multiculturalism and how multiculturalism plays out in their curriculum and school ethos.

Finally, this study focused primarily on students and did not look deeply enough at parents' and immigrant communities' interactions with both kinds of schools. As key stakeholders in their children's education, parents and immigrant communities hold valuable insights about school-based reform efforts and policy-making processes. With school choice becoming an increasing phenomenon, it would be relevant to study how immigrant families and communities are affecting change in schools, and how schools are more effectively responding, communicating and reaching out to their clients.

Final Words

With growing numbers of East African Muslim immigrant youth and few studies conducted with this population, it is imperative that we continue to learn how best to meet their academic and social needs. By placing the knowledge and experiences of East African youth at the center of this inquiry, I hope that my research has filled part of this research gap, providing much-needed information about a seldom studied immigrant population and yielding important implications for teaching and teacher preparation across *all* fields of education. I hope that my research will serve educators to better understand the academic issues and social demands associated with being an East African

Muslim immigrant in U.S. schools and reveal to others how these experiences come to shape their identities. Additionally, I hope that this study has helped to fill a void in the research that investigates the rapidly growing culturally-specific charter school phenomenon. Ultimately, I hope that this study will shed further light on how all schools can decrease the barriers students face in schools and demonstrate constructive and necessary ways to accommodate and respect the academic, cultural, religious and racial identity of East African immigrant youth.

Appendix A: Individual Interview Questions for Students**Individual Interview Questions: Students***Prior experiences*

1. Tell me about your life before coming to the United States.
Prompts: Where were you born? Where were your parents born? What countries have you lived in? What do you remember about living there? What languages do you speak? Have you ever visited your parents' country of birth?
2. I know that a lot of kids from East Africa had stop going to school due to the war, waiting for processing, and being in a refugee camp. Were you able to go to school before coming to the U.S.?
 - a. (If so), tell me a little about that schooling experience.
 - b. What kinds of things did your family and friends tell you about school while you were growing up?
3. Let's talk about what it was like to come to the United States/ Minneapolis for the first time.
 - a. Tell me about your first impression of life here. Did anything surprise you?
 - b. How does your growing up in America different from your parents growing up in Somalia or ____?
 - c. Let's pretend a friend of yours still in Kenya was moving to United States tomorrow, what would you tell him/her about what it was like for you to come here?
 - d. If s/he asks you about how it is to be a Somali or _____ in the U.S., what would you tell him/her?
 - e. If s/he asks you about what it is like to practice Islam and be Muslim here, what might you say?

- f. What do you think of when you think of “American?”
 - g. Some East Africans have told me that Americans often lump East Africans with African Americans- calling both populations ‘Black’ and not making differences between the two groups of people. Have you experienced this? How do you feel about this?
4. Let’s talk about your first experiences in American schools. What school did you first go to when you moved to the U.S.? Let’s talk about your experiences in that school.
- a. What’s the first thing you remember when you think back to your experience in that school?
 - b. Let’s return to your friend in Kenya who is moving to Minneapolis. Let’s say s/he is going to attend that school. What would you tell him/her about it?
 - c. What would you tell him or her about American kids?
 - About American teachers?
 - About being an East African immigrant in the U.S.?
 - (If a girl) About being an East African girl in the U.S.?
 - About learning English?
 - d. What was it like to be an East African immigrant in that school? How did your teachers treat you? How did the other students treat you?
 - e. Tell me about some good experiences you had at X school. What did you like about X school?
 - f. Tell me about some difficult experiences you had at X school. What did you not like about X school?
 - g. Tell me about your classes in that school. What were they like? *Prompts:* How often did you find yourself in classes that weren’t ESL classes? Did you have many experiences with non-ESL students inside of school? Outside of school?

- h. In your classes, how often did you experience your culture being included? In what ways? (*Prompts: materials, teacher-talk, in-class activities & assignments*)
- i. Did your experiences at X school change you in any way?
- j. Are there certain things you miss about X school?
- k. If you could give that school some advice on how to treat Somali immigrants differently, what advice would you give?

Current experiences

- 5. I'd like to start with some follow up questions from our last interview...
- 6. Today we're going to focus on your current experiences at Kalsami High.
 - a. What made you change schools and come to Kalsami High?
 - b. How did you feel about leaving X school?
 - c. How did you first feel about coming to Kalsami High?
- 7. You've been at Kalsami High for ___ years now.
 - a. How is school here at the Kalsami different than the school you attended before?
 - b. What is it like for you to attend a school in which most of the students are Somali/ East African?
 - c. What are the good things about being a student at Kalsami High? What are the problems?
 - d. Why do you think people choose to go to this school over other schools? Why might some people choose not to go?
- 8. What do your parents think about Kalsami High? Do they ever come to school here? Do they participate in activities here? Did they before? Why do you think that is?

9. Last time we met you told me about some of your experiences with teachers at your other school. How do these experiences compare with your experiences with the teachers here?
10. What about your friends/classmates here? How would you describe students here? Is there a difference in the way you interact with classmates here at Kalsami High than the way you interacted with peers at X school before?
11. Is it different to be a Muslim here at Kalsami High compared to X school?
12. Do you find yourself talking about your religion (*diin*) in different ways here at Kalsami High? How often do you discuss being a Somali or being Muslim in your classes here?
13. Is this different for the Muslim students in regular high schools, how, why?
14. Has your experience as a student at Kalsami High changed you in any way?
15. Do you dress differently here at Kalsami High than at X school? Do you dress differently outside of school? Has your clothing style changed from when you first arrived in this country, to when you were a student at X, to now?
16. What is your impression of the newcomer students in this school? How do you think most students at this school view the newcomer students?

Outlook for the future

17. I'd like to begin by asking you some follow-up questions from our last interview...
18. Recall your first impression of moving to Minnesota.

- a. Has it changed much from that initial impression?
- b. Would you like to live in Minnesota for the rest of your life?
- c. What about “American culture” do you not like? What do you find positive?
- d. Where do you see yourself doing in five years? In ten years?
- e. How do you plan to reach these goals?
- f. Do you feel this school helps you to achieve those goals?
- g. Is there anything that worries you about achieving your goals?
- h. What kinds of things can schools and teachers do to make schooling in the U.S. easier for immigrant students, especially those from Somalia?

Appendix B: Staff Interview Questions

Staff Interview Questions

Mainstream School Experiences

1. Describe your experiences teaching East African youth in mainstream schools:
 - How did East African youth fit in socially at your mainstream school?
 - How did East African youth perform academically in your mainstream school?
 - How were East African youth received religiously and culturally in your mainstream school?
 - How were they treated as Black immigrant youth?
 - What else would you add about how East African youth experienced mainstream schools?

Kalsami High School Experiences

2. How would you describe your students here?
3. Why do you think students come to Kalsami?
4. What has surprised you about working with the students at Kalsami?
5. What are the advantages of the sheltered program here?
 - What are the drawbacks?
6. What do you want students to take away from your class?
7. Do you find that references to your students' cultures come up in your classroom?
8. Talk about what has been in working most rewarding with students at [Kalsami].
 - What has been the most challenging?
9. If you could implement a change to better the educational experiences of East African students, what would you like to see happen in mainstream schools? At Kalsami?

Appendix C: Student Questionnaire

Student Questionnaire

Background Information:

1. Name: _____ Age: _____

Email address: _____ Phone number: _____

Best time to meet with me (after school, Saturdays, during lunch): _____

2. What is your grade in school? Check one: 9 10 11 12

3. Where were you born? _____

4. Where did you grow up? _____

5. Who do you live with at home? _____

6. Which language do you use most often at home? _____

7. Which language do you use most often with friends? _____

Previous Schooling Experiences:

8. Describe where you have gone to school throughout your life:

9. What school did you go to just before coming here to Ubah?

_____ Where was that school? _____

10. How would you describe your experience at that last school?

Coming to Ubah Medical Academy

11. What made you decide to come to Ubah Medical Academy?

12. How would you describe your experience at Ubah compared to the school you attended before Ubah?

13. What are your plans after high school?

YOU ARE...:

14. How would you describe yourself?

15. What are you are most successful at?

16. What is difficult for you?

Please write your name here if you would like to be contacted about your participation in an interview:

Thank you for completing this questionnaire!

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