

Becoming In/competent Learners in the United States: Refugee Students' Academic Identities in the Figured World of Difference

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A practice-based dialectic theory of identity was used in this study to explore the cultural-historical context of an urban charter school in which a group of newly arrived Muslim Turk refugee students' academic identities were formed. The school, located in the Southwestern United States, was founded by a global Islamist movement. Ethnographic methods were employed over a nine-month period of fieldwork. Findings suggest the demands and consequences of claiming competent learner identities were costly when the refugee students struggled to participate in multiple cultural worlds. The refugee students were sorted into generic institutional identities such as English Language Learners that came with negative social implications and resulted in exclusion of the students from general education classrooms. Over time, the refugee students became closer to special education identification.

Keywords: English language learners, figured world, identity formation, Muslim refugee students, special education, urban charter school

Siz karasiz diyirdi_Negro diyirdiler. . . Biz orada Black idik buraya geldik White olduk. [They used to tell us we were dark. They used to call us Negro. . . . We were Black there. We came here and became White.] (Mehmet Alihan,¹ Parent).

Refugee is a legal position that signifies displaced people who fled their countries of origin due to fear of persecution or imprisonment based on their racial, religious, political, and social affiliations. There are approximately 10.5 million refugees around the world, and their populations steadily grow due to global sociopolitical turmoil (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2011). Each year tens of thousands of newly arrived refugee youth come to the United States. Schools are often the first and most consequential spaces where refugee youth participate in institutional and social discourses and develop their identities. In this study, I examined the ways in which the identities of a group of newly arrived refugee youth were formed as kinds

¹Pseudonyms are used to mask the identity of the participants and participating school.

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of learners at an urban charter school in a Southwestern border state. The study contributes to contextually situated understandings of young refugees' complex and evolving orchestration of multiple identities suggested by the opening quote.

There is a growing international research literature on the role of formal education in refugee children's experience in resettlement countries (e.g., Matthews, 2008; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012; Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton, 1990). While the United States has been the top refugee resettlement country in the world, young refugees' individual and cultural transformation and experiences in U.S. schools have not been studied adequately (McBrien, 2005). Access to education and academic achievement are seen as the key factors that enable refugee youth to experience stability and protection as well as to gain skills to "make it" in resettlement countries (McBrien, 2005). On the other hand, schools reproduce race, gender, language, or ability-based inequalities in a given society by privileging certain identities and their attendant ways of knowing, behaving, and being and by marginalizing others (Artiles, 2003; Hatt, 2012).

Learner identities are defined "as the ways we come to understand ourselves within and in relation to the institution of schooling and how this identity shapes our own self-perceptions of efficacy, ability, and success in relation to academic potential, performance, and achievement" (Hatt, 2012, p. 439). Studying learner identity formation informs us about individual students as well as the sociocultural organization of U.S. schools. Schools can function as an iron cage of further marginalization or as rich and supportive contexts for transformation and emancipation for newly arrived refugee students. As cultural artifacts, institutionalized generic identity categories used to classify learners such as "learning disabled," "genius," "street-smart," or "troublemaker" are continuously produced as cultural artifacts that mediate—and are mediated by—social and institutional discourses of formal schooling (McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 2006). Reproduction of these cultural artifacts involves "acts of inclusion/exclusion, of allowing/compelling only certain people to evince the sign that maintains positions and the value of artifacts as indices of position" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 135). Rubin (2007) found that social positions offered to racial-minority students at an urban high school were almost always negative, such as "thug," "dumb," or "violent." To claim a competent learner identity, students of color needed to comply with "rote, repetitive tasks that were distanced from meaning, amid humiliating interactions and unflattering categorizations" (p. 240).

Refugee youth bring extremely diverse experiences, strengths, interests, and cultural and linguistic practices, and attend schools alongside other youth from nondominant communities. To date, we know little about newly arrived refugee students' identity formation in U.S. schools (McBrien, 2005). This study offers insights about the identity formations of a group of Muslim Turk refugee youth at an urban charter school run by educators from Turkey.

Grounded in an interdisciplinary framework, including insights from cultural-historical psychology, educational anthropology, and refugee/immigration studies, the present study explores Ahıska refugee students' institutionally mediated, historically evolving identity formation with its consequences for Ahıska students. There is a growing literature of anthropological and sociolinguistic studies on Ahıska Turks refugees (e.g., Aydingün, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov, & Swerdlow, 2006; Cetinkaya & Kodan, 2012; Coşkun, 2009). This study focusing on young Ahıska refugees' identity formation at the intersection of race, language, and ability may shed light on the transformations of Ahıska youth and the contexts of the U.S. schools.

AHISKA TURKS

Ahıska Turks² have experienced horrific circumstances of forced migration, systemic discrimination, limited educational and economic opportunities, and social violence in the former Soviet Republics. They are originally from the Ahıska (Meskhetia) region of Georgia near the border with Turkey. It is estimated there are approximately 300,000 Ahıska Turks, most of whom live in nine countries, including Uzbekistan, the Russian Federation, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and now the United States (Barton, 2006). Ahıska was a part of Turkey as an Ottoman Empire territory until 1829, when the region became a part of the Russian Empire. In 1944, Ahıska Turks were forced to move to Central Asian states of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in cattle wagons (Aydingün et al., 2006). After the dissolution of the USSR, Ahıska Turks continued facing systemic and social challenges (Aydingün et al., 2006). In 1989, hundreds of Ahıska Turks were killed, and many lost the wealth they had accumulated after their first displacement. As a result, Ahıska Turks were resettled in neighboring states, mostly in Krasnodar, a Russian Federation region on the Black Sea. In Russia, they continued to be the subjects of systemic and social maltreatments, discriminations, and physical and symbolic violence. Finally, the United States accepted approximately 14,000 Ahıska Turks as refugees in 2004.

Most Ahıska Turks have maintained cultural and emotional ties with Turkey and consider themselves Muslim Turks. Despite the fact that their official relations with Turkey have been cut off for 180 years, they regard Turkey as their motherland and themselves as a part of the imagined Turkish nation (Bal & Arzubiaga, 2013). Aydingün and colleagues (2006) found that “the need to preserve the mother tongue and Turkishness is stressed by almost all Meskhetian [Ahıska] Turks and is mentioned as the most important group value and the symbol of its ethnic identity” (p. 24). Ahıska refugees in the United States have kept Turkish as their primary language. Almost all of the Ahıska adults were fluent in written and spoken Russian and in the other languages within the Soviet states where they were relocated (e.g., Uzbek). They have used multiple alphabets for writing, including the Cyrillic, Arabic, and Latin alphabets.

Inseparable from Turkishness, religion is another important signifier for Ahıska cultural identity. Working with Ahıska refugees in Philadelphia, Cetinkaya and Kodan (2012) found they “are not strictly observant Muslims, however they practice circumcision, refrain from pork, fast during the month of Ramadan and celebrate the Muslim holidays of Ramadan Bayramı (Eid al-Fitr) and Kurban Bayramı (Eid al- adha)” (p. 400). Islamic faith became a symbol of their struggle in their refugee experience and collective memory (Bal & Arzubiaga, 2013).

ON IDENTITY

Identity has been gaining increased attention in educational research. In the present study, I used Holland et al.’s (1998) sociocultural theory of identity, *practiced identities*, informed by Lev Vygotsky’s Marxist cultural-historical psychology and theory of semiotic mediation. Marx (1979) stated “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (pp. 11–12). As a result, in Holland et al.’s

²Ahıska Turks are also called Meskhetian or Meskheti Turks in the literature in reference to the Georgian name of the Ahıska region. In this manuscript, I use Ahıska based on the participants’ preference.

(1998) theory of identity formation, what is commonly considered personal and social is inseparable: “Forms of personhood and forms of society are historical products, intimate and public, that situate the interactivity of social practices” (p. 270).

Identity formation is an ongoing social-historical-spatial process as individuals participate in *figured worlds*, defined as culturally mediated activity systems (Holland et al., 1998). People construct who they are, who they become, and how to relate to one another through their participation in figured worlds mediated by cultural artifacts available in those worlds. Individuals internalize cultural artifacts (e.g., cultural models, labels) propagated by figured worlds, which they join as novice participants and make those artifacts their own (Cole, 1996).

The notion of figured worlds has been used as a theoretical tool to study how people heuristically form their selfhood within constraints and opportunities of specific social-historical-spatial contexts, such as the figured world of literacy for illiterate adults in Brazil (Bartlett & Holland, 2002), the figured world of French language immersion for immigrants in Canada (Dagenais, Day, & Toohey, 2006), and the figured world of smartness for youth from historically marginalized communities in the United States (Hatt, 2012). In this study, I am interested in the figured world of difference that I define as a space where the Ahiska refugee students’ cultural and linguistic differences are socially and institutionally constructed and academic identities are formed as kinds of learners. The following research questions guided the study:

- RQ1: How are newly arrived Ahiska refugee students’ learner identities collectively formed at a U.S. charter school?
 RQ2: What are the consequences of these identities for Ahiska refugee students?

METHODS

I used a collective case methodology to understand the figured world of difference at an urban charter school (Stake, 2005). Case studies should be examined holistically as situated in specific contexts (Morrow & Smith, 2000). I followed Varenne and McDermott’s (1998) recommendation that examining identity formation should start with local activity settings while showing the ways in which people navigate across those settings. I took refugee students acting in school context as the unit of analysis (see Bal & Arzubiga, 2013 for the findings on the figured world of resettlement in Ahiska refugee families).

Setting: A Secular-Islamist Charter School in a Border State

River Science School, a charter elementary school in a Southwestern border state, was the setting of the study. The state has been one of the political battlegrounds for immigration reforms perpetuated by voter-driven downward assimilationist policies that negatively impact the education of immigrant and bilingual students (García, 2005). In addition, the state had the highest number of charter schools in the United States. Charter schools³ are nonprofit, tuition-free schools that

³The first charter school law passed in 1991 in the United States. The promise of the charter schools is that with more curricular flexibility and administrative autonomy, charter schools would increase student learning, promote innovation and diversification of learning environments, and expand opportunities for teachers to become more actively involved

can be run by private and public entities through a contract with states or a local school board that outlines operating procedures and sets a timeline for receiving public funding. The amount of their funding is linked to the number of students they enroll.

River Science School served mainly racial minority and immigrant and refugee students. The school was located in an impoverished part of the downtown area of a metropolis between a large university campus and highly segregated neighborhoods. The school had a diverse population, with approximately 270 students in Grades K–11. Approximately 50% of all students were Latino/a, 20% were Turkish from Ahıska and Turkey, 20% White, 5% African American, and the remaining 5% were from other immigrant/refugee communities, such as Somalia. One-third of the students qualified for free or reduce-price lunch. The curriculum of the school focused on college preparation, math, science, and technology. In the 2008–2009 school year, the school was categorized as “highly performing,” based on the state’s achievement profiles because its students exceeded the standard on the state’s achievement test that met specific thresholds. The administrators and science and ESL teachers were from Turkey, whereas the majority of the teachers in the school were local. A majority of the Turkish teachers did not have a degree in education but passed the assessment test required for teaching in the state.

River Science School showed typical characteristics of the schools inspired by a transnational Islamist movement, Cemaat. Cemaat was born in Turkey and became one of the most influential global political and religious movements since the 1980s. The movement runs a strong network of approximately 1,000 schools and numerous businesses, charities, and media outlets spread widely from Asia to the Americas (Turgut, 2010). In the United States, the first Cemaat-inspired charter school was opened in 1999. Today Cemaat runs one of the largest charter school networks in the United States, with 135 schools enrolling more than 45,000 students (Strauss, 2012). In this global movement, schools are the key elements that are expanding Cemaat’s influence. The organization of the Cemaat-inspired schools varies from one national context to another but share a common organizational structure. These schools are not classical religious schools (e.g., Jesuit schools or Islamic madrasas) with overtly religious curricula. Globally, the schools have a focus on science, math, and college prep, using English as the instructional language and blending in with the national education systems. The majority of students attending Cemaat-inspired schools in the United States are non-Turkish and non-Muslim. As a matter of fact, most of the parents may not even know those schools are inspired with a Muslim religious movement (Strauss, 2012).

Participants

For the selection of the Ahıska participants, I used a purposeful sampling approach. I recruited Ahıska students who were between the ages of 9 and 13 and who had lived in the United States for less than three years, a common descriptor that is used to define “newly arrived” immigrants in immigration studies (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Six Ahıska students, 12 Ahıska parents, and 6 educators participated in this study ($N = 24$). Five students were male (Mikhail, Umut, Gabriel, Adaham, and Fatih), and one student was female (Elmira). Fatih and Elmira were 9 years old and

in curriculum design and school governance. Nevertheless, charter schools are under critical scrutiny, as they have not produced intended academic outcomes, while diverting much-needed resources from public schools and intensifying social segregation based on race and ability differences (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003).

attended the second and third grades. Mikhail, Umut, Gabriel, and Adaham were 13 years old and attended sixth and seventh grades. Student participants spoke Turkish, Russian, and English. Ahıska parents spoke Turkish, Russian, and Uzbek and were proficient in written Russian. They mostly worked in low-paying jobs (e.g., bread maker or factory worker), while most of them had college degrees.

Mr. Tuna was the first principal during the study. Mrs. Asya, the ESL teacher, had over 10 years of experience teaching English in Turkey and the United States. Her spouse, Mr. Asya, a math teacher with 10 years of teaching experience in Turkey and the United States, served as the vice principal. In the fall semester, Mr. Asya replaced Mr. Tuna, who had gone to another Cemaat-inspired school as principal. All Turkish educators were bilingual Turkish and English speakers. Three local “American” educators also participated in the study. The American educators were White and native English speakers. The third-grade teacher, Mrs. Martin, was an experienced teacher with over 15 years of experience. Mrs. Randall taught Language Arts and was in her second year of teaching. The special education teacher, Mrs. Beesly, was in her fifth year of teaching.

Researcher Positionality

My professional and personal experiences informed me in this study. I share the same ethnic and linguistic background with the Ahıska refugees. I grew up in a low-income family in an inner-city neighborhood in Turkey with limited economic and educational opportunities. My parents, who were illiterate and disabled, belonged to a religious minority group that has faced institutionalized discrimination in Turkey for centuries. Informed by a Marxist historical-materialist perspective, my work has focused on understanding social-historical-spatial constructions of deficit and designing culturally responsive, expansive learning contexts for nondominant youth from historically marginalized communities.

I have worked with refugee communities from Asia and Africa in the United States such as the Lost Boys of Sudan through resettlement agencies and Amnesty International. Before and during the study, I had participated in Ahıska community events and festivities, visiting participants’ homes and sharing meals with them. I had made personal connections with the school administration. Before data collection, I volunteered in the ESL classroom at the school for a month as a teacher’s assistant. I was cognizant of ethical and political issues related to research with refugee communities and my continually negotiated insider/outsider position.

Data Collection Procedures

Participant Observations and Video Recordings

I conducted 94 hours of participant observations in the ESL and mainstream Language Arts classrooms, of which 40 hours were video recorded. In the first two weeks, I observed six consecutive full school days to understand what was ordinary in those classrooms (Erickson, 1986). My subsequent fieldwork entailed observations two to three times per week for two to six hours of school activities and settings, including school assemblies, the playground, and the teachers’ lounge.

Interviews

I used an ethnographic interviewing methodology with a variation of what Spradley (1979) called grand tour, task-related, and experience questions to elicit my understanding of the figured world of difference constructed at River Science School. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth entry, exit, and unstructured follow-up interviews. I conducted entry interviews with Principal Mr. Asya, teachers ($n = 4$), and student participants ($n = 6$). I conducted exit interviews with the ESL teacher, the Language Arts teacher, Mikhail, Umut, and Adaham, who stayed in the school at the end of the study. These interviews had an average duration of 45 minutes. Generally, after each classroom observation, I conducted follow-up interviews with the teachers and student participants in which I asked clarifying questions about the observed activities. Six interviews were conducted with the parents in Ahıska family homes to gather information about histories and practices regarding resettlement and education.

BASC-TRS-2

Worlds of difference in schools are often indexed in student behavioral disorders or learning disabilities. For this reason, I used the BASC-2 to understand teachers' official representations of students' behavioral difficulties and social skills. Teachers are the main source of referrals for special education services related to student learning and behavioral difficulties. Referral decisions are key gatekeeping points, as most cases (70%–90%) end up placed in special education (Klingner & Harry, 2006). Teacher assessments represent a crucial contributor to the creation of institutional student academic identities. Thus, I used a standardized teacher rating scale, Behavior Assessment System Teacher Rating Scales (BASC-TRS-2) (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004). BASC-2 was the most widely used behavioral assessment in the state for special education placement for behavioral disorders and learning disabilities. BASC-2 gives five composite scores, including externalizing problems (e.g., aggression), internalizing problems (e.g., depression), school problems, behavioral symptoms index, and adaptive skills (e.g., leadership, social skills, and adaptive skills) (see Figures 1 and 2). BASC-2 has reliability coefficients exceeding .90 for externalizing problems and adaptive skills composites (Tan, 2007).

Data Analysis Procedures

I employed Erickson's (1986) Interpretative Research approach. This was done to generate preliminary assertions about the key cultural artifacts that mediated the figured world of difference. These artifacts included cultural models, assessments, institutionally sanctioned categories, and the social and cognitive organizations of the classrooms. I established the evidentiary warrant for these assertions by testing them against the whole data corpus for confirming and disconfirming evidence. I developed an initial understanding of the evidence and generated preliminary hypotheses through multiple listening/readings of the data. I looked for commonalities between emerging hypotheses to identify key linkages between the school cultural models and the refugee students' identity formations. The linked themes were reorganized into larger themes I tested repetitively for confirming and disconfirming evidence and sought possible patterns of generalization (Erickson, 1986). To enhance trustworthiness of the study, I followed four criteria that

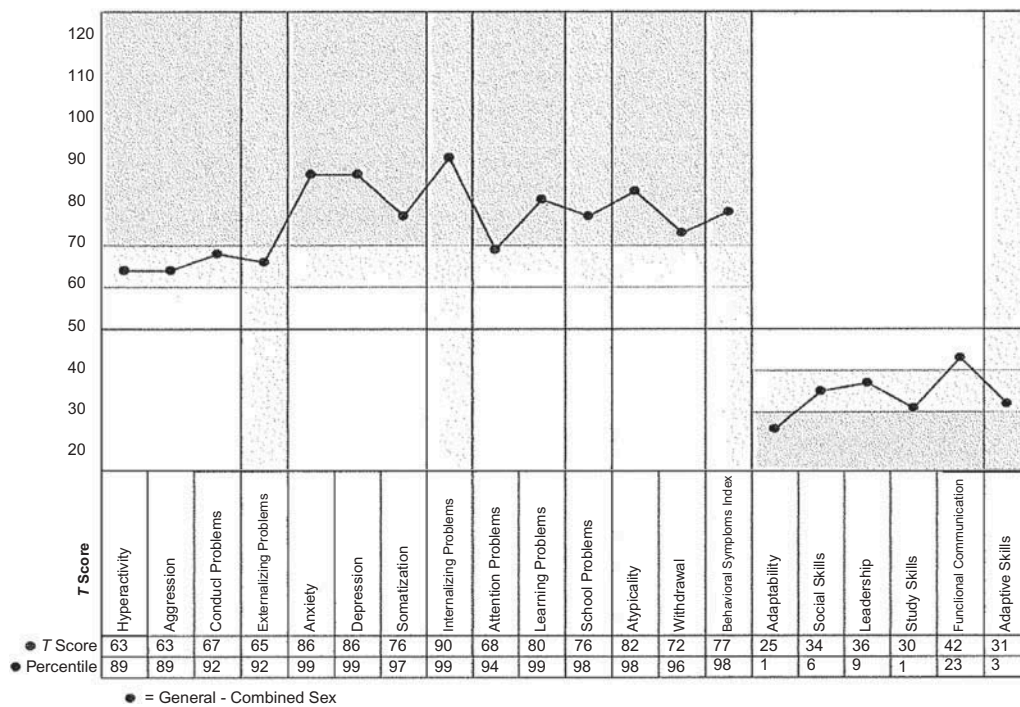


FIGURE 1 Adaham’s BASC-TRS-2 score profile in ESL classroom.
Source: Bal, 2009.

overlapped and complemented each other: (a) cohesion, (b) evidentiary adequacy and immersion, (c) data triangulation, and (d) peer debriefing (Erickson, 1986; Morrow & Smith, 2000; Stake, 2005). I made sure that data were presented in a cohesive way and that my interpretations and conclusions were supported by the accuracy and variety of data sources with replicable data collection procedures. I attempted to spend adequate time in the field to develop trust and comprehensive understandings of participants across multiple activity settings (e.g., classrooms and homes). I also had regular peer debriefing sessions with three professors of education and a group of doctoral students through a research seminar in which I received feedback regarding my research methodology, data collection, analysis, and dissemination.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings of the study revealed a dynamic landscape within the figured world of difference. The figured world of difference at River Science School was co-constructed through two pivotal cultural artifacts: a deficit-oriented cultural model (i.e., difference as deficit) and generic characters. Ahiska students were positioned via prototypical or generic characters, most notably “the English Language Learners (ELLs)” and “the racialized learners,” which were predominantly framed from deficit angles. The generic characters were imposed upon the refugee students through

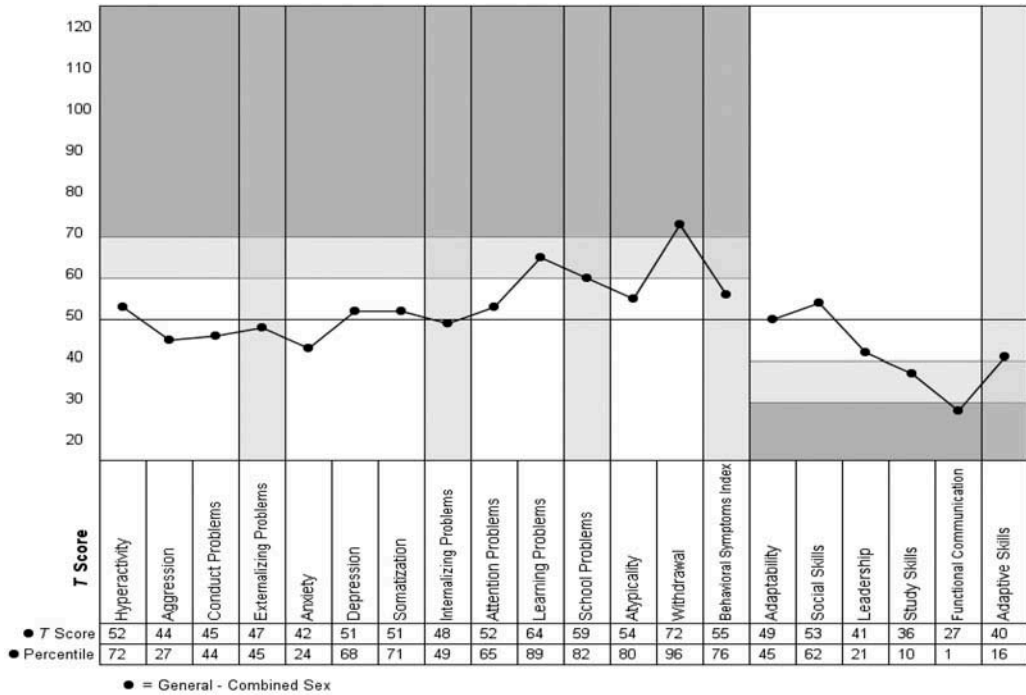


FIGURE 2 Adaham’s BASC-TRS-2 profile in general education classroom. Source: Bal, 2009.

recurring institutional acts (social sorting and inclusion/exclusion). As a result, the Ahiska students’ behavioral and linguistic differences were constructed as deficits, and even as disabilities for some of them, across general education and the ESL classrooms. In the following, I discuss the deficit-oriented cultural model and key generic characters to explain how the Ahiska students’ identities were collectively formed as kinds of learners with specific consequences.

From Difference to Deficit

Cultural models are “something like ‘movies’ or ‘videotapes’” (Gee, 2008, p. 104): “We all have a vast store of these simulations, each of which depicts prototypical (what we take to be ‘normal’) events in a simplified world” (p. 104). At the school, Ahiska students constantly moved across the different configurations of the figured world of difference as formed in the general education and ESL classrooms. In these contexts, there were competing assumptions about the students’ academic and behavioral struggles and the positions available for Ahiska students to claim or take on. Nonetheless, the difference as deficit cultural model governed those contexts. This model places the blame of struggles experienced by nondominant students on those students’ cultural and linguistic practices. The deficit-oriented model is deeply rooted in the U.S. education system and used to justify the enduring educational disparities (Erickson, 2009).

Ahiska students were labeled ELLs, an institutionally sanctioned category. This identification was, however, made through a spatial arrangement, not a language proficiency test as directed by the state. Within the first few weeks of school, Ahiska students were frequently sent to the principal's office because of their limitations in the English language and their classroom behaviors. The older students, Mikhail, Umut, Gabriel, and Adaham, constantly received Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs), specifically by a veteran history teacher because: "These students insisted on sitting together and helping each other in independent classroom activities and did not turn in their homework on time" (Mrs. Asya, Fieldnote).

School administrators' solution to teachers' complaints and increasing ODRs was to pull out those Ahiska students during the Language Arts classes and to provide instruction in small groups organized by grade level. This self-contained classroom became the ESL program without a specific curricular arrangement. The ESL classroom was not constructed as a "real classroom" physically or ideally. Two walls of the room were glass windows. You could see the others waiting or walking in the hall.

Mrs. Asya, the assigned teacher to the ESL classroom, was following the same syllabi and weekly activities as the mainstream Language Arts, only at a slower pace. The ESL classroom activities were rote, repetitive, and noncollaborative, such as "reading a text out loud, while the others were following the text with their eyes" (Fieldnote). Mrs. Asya acknowledged that her instructional methods included mainly teacher-oriented activities because "[the program] does not have a specialized curriculum" (Interview). Within the first couple of weeks of the beginning of the academic year, the ESL classroom was filled with Ahiska students and other immigrant and refugee students from nondominant cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Interestingly, Latino and African American students whose first language was English were also referred to the ESL classroom by their teachers because these students' school behaviors were considered disruptive. For instance, in the ESL class for second graders, there were three Latino and two African American students in addition to four refugee students.

The following difference-as-deficit model mediated educators' perceptions regarding the ELLs: ELLs' home languages, including various vernaculars of English (Ebonics or Spanglish), posed problems for learning. The third-grade homeroom teacher, Mrs. Martin, stated the conceptual link between nondominant students' linguistic differences and "school knowledge" thusly: "If they come here speaking Turkish or Russian or whatever language, they are in between . . . that makes it difficult because they have no school knowledge" (Interview).

Mrs. Martin, an experienced monolingual teacher, drew a direct link between English proficiency and the school knowledge that goes beyond having a home language other than English. A mismatch between nondominant students' ways of speaking, knowing, and being and school knowledge was constructed as a potential problem. Thus, the most significant academic task for the ELLs was to gain school knowledge by using "correct" English and performing the school knowledge appropriately, such as working independently and not helping each other.

The deficit-oriented cultural model should be understood as situated in larger sociohistorical contexts. At the macro level, it has been naturalized and is now largely invisible in the mundane daily life of schools through political beliefs, popular imaginations, institutional policies, teacher education, and professional development programs (García, 2005). The deficit-oriented model has prevailed in the United States, particularly regarding the education of people with ability differences in "curative geographies" such as asylums and residential schools as the optimal educational response (Danforth, Taff, & Ferguson, 2006).

None of the teachers—Turkish or American—questioned why Ahiska students’ needs were not addressed within the spatial boundaries of mainstream classrooms and why Ahiska students were placed in a separate room without appropriate assessments and curricular arrangements (e.g., augmentation or alteration):

I went to the nuts and bolts thing they [the state’s educational agency] did because of the lawsuits because . . . the ELL kids are not working under the current system. Four hours a day might be more helpful in here [ESL program] rather than catching here and there. (Mrs. Martin, Interview)

As evidenced by this quote, the deficit-oriented cultural model at the macro level was localized and laminated through the professional development workshops provided by the state’s educational agency. Rhetoric of the workshop did not challenge the policies and practices that created unequal opportunities and outcomes for linguistic minority students in this border state.

At this school, the ESL classroom institutionally functioned as a heterotopia, a space of otherness (Foucault, 1986). Utopias are the sites that present a cultural group in a perfect form. Heterotopias are the countersites of Utopias and function as mirrors. From the eye of power, a mirror reflects where one is not and makes the place one occupies at this time real (Foucault, 1986). There are two forms of heterotopia: *Heterotopias of crisis* and *heterotopias of deviation*. Heterotopias of crisis are spaces reserved for individuals, who are in crisis in relation to their society, such as the boarding schools for adolescents (Foucault, 1986). Heterotopias of deviation are the sites such as psychiatric hospitals and prisons “in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (Foucault, 1986, p. 25). For Ahiska students, the ESL classroom was constructed as a heterotopia of crisis in which they were placed in a period of crisis, when they lacked privileged school behavior and language. With the absence of special education program, the ESL classroom also functioned as a heterotopia of deviation for native racial minority students (African American and Latino students).

Constructing Racialized Learner Identities

Figured worlds are spaces of collective meaning making “in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over other” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52). In the figured world of difference, the first and most consequential generic character was *the ELL* as discussed earlier. The second key generic character, against which Ahiska students’ identities were formed, was *the racialized learner*.

In the figured world of difference, the racialized learner identities were key generic characters against which Ahiska students’ familial strengths and needs were constructed in relation to the other racialized kinds of students. Mrs. Martin evaluated Ahiska students’ behaviors against those of what she referred to as “Hispanics”:

I have the Spanish speaking ones. I have the Turkish or Russian ones. They are very different—Hispanics are more like “I’d rather have a siesta right now.” They [Ahiska] are helpful, are willing to make effort—it goes into their culture. I noticed in our neighborhoods—they [Hispanics] would be outside socializing—if you have a culture like that, when you go home, are you gonna do homework? (Interview)

Mrs. Martin, a White American teacher, interpreted Ahiska students’ behaviors in reference to the collective construction of the generic Hispanic character. Here the hidden normative generic

character is “White” along with White culture and its idealized Puritan work ethic, which stands in stark contrast with Hispanics who are more “laid back.” In the ladder of cultural evolution, Ahıska students and their culture had deficits (“no school knowledge”), but they were closer to Whites compared to Hispanics since Ahıska students were “willing to make effort.” In the United States, whiteness provides the definition of educable learners, and some nondominant groups are given more positive status at the expense of other nondominant groups (Lee, 2004). For example, the generic character of Asian students as model minorities could only be understood in relation to the generic character of African American students as lazy and low achieving (Lee, 2004).

The racialization of students also mediated how the racialized kinds of learners related to one another. In May, the ESL teacher was leading an in-class discussion about different “cultural celebrations” (e.g., Cinco de Mayo). The intended outcome of the activity was “to raise awareness of multiculturalism among students” (Document Analysis). When Mrs. Asya talked about different cultures, Fatih referred to Youssouf, an immigrant from Senegal, and stated:

Fatih: Youssouf is Black. We are White.

Mrs. Asya: No, no, you cannot say Black.

In this exchange, Fatih, an Ahıska student, positioned himself and the rest of the class (“We”) against his classmate as a racialized other. Against Youssouf, Fatih configured not only his racialized identity as being White, but also the racialized patterns of communication. Mrs. Asya confirmed Fatih’s claim about his whiteness. Mrs. Asya used this incident as a teachable moment for Fatih and the rest of the “We” (Whites) to learn how to relate to and talk about the Black learners as racialized others. This was particularly notable, as this interaction took place in the ESL classroom, a heterotopia, where the students were excluded from mainstream classrooms due to their non-White-like linguistic and behavioral characteristics. Fatih, an Ahıska Turk, and the ESL teacher, an immigrant from Turkey, claimed their whiteness through the formation of Youssouf’s Blackness as the Other of the others.

Forming learner identities in U.S. schools involves developing racialized sense of selves: “Americanization, in practice, is a process of racialization of social relations and identities” (Lave, 1996, p. 159). This is powerfully demonstrated in the epigraph: “*Biz orada Black idik buraya geldik White olduk* [“We were Black there. We came here and became White”] (Mr. Alihan, Interview). This excerpt illustrates the dynamic notion of identity and how cultural identification results from spatiotemporal segmentation processes: *Black there once, White here now*. During their resettlement in Russia, Ahıska families experienced significant social and institutional discriminations because of their non-Slavic ethnicity and religion, such as denying access to higher education or owning property (Aydingün et al., 2006).

At River Science School, Ahıska students were often put in contradictory positions in different contexts. They were positioned as more White-like by the American teachers, but they were still lacking the privileged way of being. This, in turn, created certain tensions within the group of Ahıska students, as some students bought into this cultural world and believed in their White racialized selves. While Mr. Alihan in the opening excerpt and Fatih in the classroom interaction mentioned earlier claimed their racial identities as White, the older Ahıska boys (Mikhail, Umut, Gabriel, and Adaham) subverted this order by developing alliances with Latino and African American students instead of the “Whites.” Umut and Mikhail explained this by stating: “For example, if we are jumped on, the Mexs and the Blacks have our backs. . . . White boys

would snitch” (Fieldnote). When the older Ahıska boys spent time with non-Ahıska students, they chose their Latino and African American peers. They signaled identification with the non-White generic characters, the “Mexs” and the “Blacks,” as reflected in their adoption of linguistic practices such as Ebonics and Spanglish. Ahıska students’ affiliation with the nondominant students, particularly their use of non-Standard English, resulted in consequential differences in status.

The teachers and administrators surveyed Ahıska students’ identification with the “Mexs” and “Blacks” through the linguistic practices. Ahıska students’ proficiency levels in nondominant literacies signified Ahıska students’ lack of skills in privileged forms of language: *Gunluk konusuyorlar ya sokak İngilizcesi. Analari babalari saniyorlar ki “benim cocugum İngilizce biliyor.” Hic alakasi yok.* [“They speak daily English, Street English. Their parents think ‘my child knows English’; however, this is not true.”] (Principal, Interview). According to Principal Asya, Ahıska students who were proficient in nondominant languages were positioned as street-wise, as opposed to the schoolwise learners who spoke and acted like White students. At the school, Ahıska students’ main task was to learn the privileged form of English and master school literacies instead of learning English to express themselves. The school’s official stance toward multiple literacies had implications in how Ahıska students saw their abilities. In Gabriel’s words: “English, I cannot understand it good—I could like talk to my friends like that. I could talk normal in the street but I cannot talk in the classroom” (Interview). Here Gabriel differentiates the two forms of English. This differentiation had little to do with the grammatical properties. It was about the institutionally enforced border between those forms and what those forms of English signified.

At the school, the Turkish administrators and a majority of teachers—except Mrs. Randall, the sixth-grade Language Arts Teacher—did not make efforts to build bridges between multiple literacies and use Ahıska students’ competence and interests in “the street English” as a resource. For some Ahıska students, their presumed cultural and linguistic differences were constructed as intrinsic learning problems and consequently brought some of the Ahıska students one step closer to special education placement.

From Deficit to Disability: The ESL Program and Special Education Link

A link between the ESL and special education programs emerged during the study for some Ahıska students. Those students’ officially assigned identities moved from ELLs to “disabled learners.” The ESL classroom was a temporary placement—a systemic limbo, if you wish—where culturally and linguistically diverse students were placed until they were sorted into institutionally standardized—more familiar and less ambiguous—identities such as able or disabled learners. In this way, the ESL classroom constituted an ambiguous space in which race and language were used as markers of difference. This space was unique in that technical procedures were not followed (e.g., language assessments) nor curricular approaches appropriate for the ELLs:

Here [pointing at a website] what the state says that a child should come to a level where she can get out from the ESL class. It says like this in its official website. The student’s stay in the program a second year is because of his laziness, carelessness, the lack of care that the families show, or the

special ed—there may be special conditions related to some students’ understanding what they read.
(Mrs. Asya, Follow-up Interview)

Mrs. Asya uttered a taken-for-granted assumption informed by the state’s educational policy about managing linguistic diversity in schools: The students who did not follow the state’s arbitrary one-year timeline for the acquisition of English were perceived by local actors as due to laziness, disability, and/or family neglect. If ELLs were not responsive to the remedy (i.e., time spent in the ESL classroom), they should be considered for special education. This way, the school engaged in “ritual conformity,” as it made symbolic compliance gestures to identify the refugee students as ELLs and then moved the Ahiska students—now ELLs—out of this category on time to stay in compliance with state policy (Artiles & Kozleski, 2014). However, little effort was made to address the needs of the refugee students and the others identified as ELLs during the time they had the label. Even though Mrs. Asya and other teachers had frequently acknowledged the structural problems in educating refugee students and the lack of proper attention to those students’ academic needs at River Science School and by the state, they easily overlooked these systemic problems. Grades and the state’s English language proficiency tests became the most significant tools to turn linguistic differences into deficits.

Special education scholars have identified the link between the ELL status and special education identification for nondominant students in U.S. schools (Artiles, Waitoller, & Neal, 2011). Trueba et al.’s study (1990) revealed this link for Hmong refugee students: Teachers and administrators believed that the refugee students had lower intelligence and cognitive skills. It is interesting to note that Hmong refugee students were referred to special education for more subjectively identified disabilities such as learning disabilities. In the fall of 2008, a full-time special education teacher, Mrs. Beesly, was hired. She recognized the ESL-special education link in her first week at the school. When I asked about the Ahiska students, she stated:

I do not have any yet—but I have a feeling I am going to have a lot. The reason I am kinda thinking that because before me there is like nothing. There is like underidentification. I think there will be more identification done—we are gonna have more ELL students identified. We are gonna have more speech students identified. And we are gonna have more special ed students identified. Now the process has been started. I have visions, you know, a stock of papers that I will get. Oh boy!

Four Ahiska students, including Adaham and Adaham’s brother, who had been placed in the ESL program, were subsequently referred for learning disabilities identification. Examining the cultural-historical reproduction of disabilities, McDermott et al. (2006) stated learning disabilities are embedded not in individual children but in the concerted activities of professionals such as psychologists or educators whose job is to produce evidence of disabilities in U.S. schools that have been organized to make symptoms of disabilities visible. In such a well-organized system committed to measuring success and failure for individuals, it is not an accident that academic and behavioral struggles of students are solely explained with intrinsic qualities. By using the tools and dis/ability specialists and creating heterotopias—the ESL and special education classrooms (Foucault, 1986)—River Science School was becoming a “real” American school, which has been a central strategy for the Cemaat-inspired charter schools. These charter schools aim to blend in with the U.S. education system (Strauss, 2012). In the following section I discuss Adaham’s case in more detail as a representative case of the institutional production of the Ahiska students as disabled kinds of learners.

Adaham, Adaham, and Adaham⁴: Ahıska Refugees' Migration in the School

During the two semesters of the study, Ahıska students were moved back and forth between the mainstream and the ESL classrooms at least four times. The institutional acts of inclusion/exclusion were consequential for Ahıska students' learner identities. This was very clear in Adaham's case. Before the special education referral, Adaham had been already marginalized in social and academic spaces because of his nonconforming identity. Adaham, a slender young boy with bright dark eyes, was the eldest of the two children in the Niyazov family. He was born in Krasnodar, Russia. Due to pursuing better economic and educational opportunities, the Niyazov family has moved several times in the resettlement countries. This has been a common practice among Ahıska refugee families (Bal & Arzubiaga, 2013). As a result, he had attended three schools in Russia and three schools in the United States until he reached the sixth grade. Adaham's father received a technical college degree in Uzbekistan and had worked at a tire shop. During this study, he was unemployed because of a work-related physical injury. Adaham's mother was working in a factory. Mrs. Niyazov was also attending a community college getting her fashion design degree that she could not complete in Russia.

I spent time with Adaham in school and at his home. I was impressed by his insightfulness and keen determination to become a painter. Unlike other Ahıska boys, Adaham was not interested in sports. In his free time, he was constantly watching tutorials for drawing on YouTube and practicing his art, including graffiti. He worked during the summer to save money for private drawing lessons. At the school, Adaham had been subjected to name-calling by non-Ahıska schoolmates since he was interested in art and avoided physical confrontations: *Cocuklar okulda birbirini dogustururlumusler. "Sen bunla dogusmezsen kizsin, korkaksin" filan diye. "Sissy Girl" falan. Amerikalilar galiba. "Anne. Dovusmezsen sissy girl falan diyirler" diyi. "Dogusmek zorundayim" diyor. Ne yapacan yani? On uc yasinda cocuk kendi gururu var. Istemez gururu ile oynasin* [At school, kids taunted each other: "If you cannot fight, you are a girl, sissy girl," etc. I think they were Americans. "Mom. They would call me 'sissy girl' if I do not fight," he says. What are you going to do? He is 13 years old. He has own pride. He does not want other children to insult him.] (Mrs. Niyazov, Interview).

At school, Ahıska boys took a social position as a group, which would not be messed with. They attended boxing and martial art classes to defend themselves and the other Ahıska people (Bal & Arzubiaga, 2013). While the other Ahıska boys defended Adaham, the name-calling did not stop. Adaham's attempt to form a nuanced identity as "an inspiring artist" beyond a "tough Ahıska boy" identity was constantly challenged by the other students. He was positioned as "the weirdo" (Fieldnote) in the school by his non-Ahıska schoolmates. As a result, Adaham was considering using the money he had saved for an art class to take a martial arts class instead.

In the ESL classroom, Adaham was consistently positioned as a "potentially learning-disabled student" with resistant and troublemaker characteristics. He was given the most discipline referrals due to his "disruptive behaviors" and "inattentiveness." Adaham gradually demonstrated less and less interest in classroom activities. He stopped completing assignments and homework and argued with his teacher constantly. At the end of sixth grade, Adaham was retained. He and his

⁴The section "Adaham, Adaham, and Adaham," was titled in reference to Varenne and McDermott's (1998) case study: "Adam, Adam, Adam, and Adam."

brother were considered for special education referral for a learning disability identification. His family left the school before the disability identification was finalized.

The next school year, Mikhail and Umut remained with Mrs. Randall for seventh-grade Language Arts since the ESL program was not opened until October. In Mrs. Randall's classroom, Adaham was still struggling with reading and writing in English. Yet, he started to show more interest in academic activities that were designed for him to show competence and bring his prior knowledge into collaborative group assignments. The social positions Adaham was afforded in the general education classroom were quite different than the ESL classroom.

I used Adaham's BASC-2 teacher evaluation scores to demonstrate the positive changes in Ahıska students' perceived academic and behavioral in/competence in ESL classroom versus in general education classroom. [Figure 1](#) shows Mrs. Asya's (ESL classroom) evaluation of Adaham. [Figure 2](#) displays Mrs. Randall's (general education classroom) scores. The data points in the gray areas of the chart above *t* score of 60 indicate high levels of malfunction in behavioral and learning problems. In the adaptive (positive) behavior domain, the scores above 30 indicate functional adaptive skills. Based on Mrs. Asya's evaluation, Adaham was showing the symptoms of externalizing disorders at borderline levels (*t* scores between 60 and 70). His scores showed internalizing disorders, school problems, behavioral symptoms index (e.g., atypicality and withdrawal) at clinically significant levels (*t* scores above 70). His adaptive skills such as adaptability and study skills were identified as dysfunctional (*t* scores between 30 and 40). Based on this evaluation with the composite scores of behavioral symptom index of 77 and adaptive skills of 31, Adaham would be a candidate for special education placement.

On the other hand, Mrs. Randall's evaluation of Adaham's behaviors was within the normal range in general (between *t* scores of 50 and 60). The composite scores for behavioral problems were lower than average (*t* = 55). In terms of adaptive skills, Adaham was identified as high functioning (*t* = 40). Mrs. Randall evaluated Adaham as having significantly high positive skills such as leadership. Mrs. Randall explained her evaluation: "Adaham has lower reading level but he is a smart student who is trying hard to get better" (Interview).

The social and curricular organizations of classrooms enable, constrain, or encourage participants to use certain skills or behaviors and to perform certain kinds of identities (Gee, 2008). Placement of Ahıska refugee students into Mrs. Randall's mainstream classroom gave them a chance to be with their English-speaking peers in a more effective learning setting in which the refugee students were exposed to high expectations, a challenging curriculum, and learning activities. In Mrs. Randall's classroom, I observed that Adaham's involvement gradually increased in academic activities that allowed him to show competence and bring his prior knowledge to group assignments: The key difference between the ESL and the mainstream classroom was the use of cooperative learning activities. Mrs. Randall successfully facilitated cooperative learning activities that helped the Ahıska students to engage in interactions with their classmates. For example, in group activities, Adaham's teammates helped him in reading and writing while he had chances to play the role of an expert in various activities as a painter. Adaham utilized drawing techniques such as creating a visual composition of the assigned reading piece (Fieldnote).

Even after a short time in the mainstream classroom with a teacher who actively attempted to build cultural competence, Ahıska students could practice competent learner positions that were available to them. Yet, without a schoolwide culturally relevant pedagogy employed in the school, these positive changes were discontinued. In the second part of the fall semester, Adaham, Umut, Fatih, and Elmira were moved back to the ESL classroom because their scores in the ESL

placement test required by the state were lower than the cut-off score. As a result, students' participation in the mainstream Language Arts classroom was discontinued.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Refugee and immigrant youth's learner identities are vital in their adaptation and academic and social outcomes in resettlement countries (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). This study contributes to the growing research literature to conceptualize newly arrived refugee students' complex experiences and schools' responses. I examined how Ahıska refugee students' learner identities were formed in the figured world of difference with specific consequences for Ahıska students. The study revealed shifting landscapes of a figured world, through which refugee students' behaviors, potentials, and access to spaces and positions were constructed from a deficit-oriented perspective.

At River Science School Ahıska students were not subjected to explicit negative attitudes and practices of marginalization that Rubin's (2007) and Hatt's (2012) studies showed for youth from nondominant racial backgrounds. The institutional acts of social sorting, inclusion/exclusion, and the difference as deficit model worked in more subtle ways at a charter school with teachers and administrators with "matching" ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Overlapping and contradicting multiple identity projects were underway for the refugee students, a global Islamic movement-inspired school, and its Turkish teachers.

Learner identities inform us not only about the individual transformations of refugee youth in the resettlement countries, but also about the immediate and larger cultural contexts in which they are educated. In the unique cultural context of this urban charter school founded by an Islamist movement, consequences of becoming competent learners were costly when Ahıska students struggled between their institutionally offered identities and their simultaneous memberships in multiple cultural worlds. ELL identification brought about students' exclusion from accessing certain social and educational spaces and practices. Ahıska students became closer to special education identification. This finding is in line with prior studies that documented how teachers' perceptions of student behaviors were used to place students in various academic programs (e.g., reading groups or honors classes) and to assign different learner identities (Hatt, 2012).

"Culture is not so much a product of sharing as a product of people hammering each other into shape with well-structured tools already available" (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 326). At this charter school, Ahıska students' diverse cultural and linguistic practices (e.g., helping each other, collaborating, or using "street English") were constructed as deficits and later as disabilities for some. This finding discloses the need for taking into account structural factors as well as individual factors for accurately understanding cultural adaptations of newly arrived refugee youth and the reproduction of dominant cultural models in the U.S. education system. Even though the educators and students shared ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, the deficit-oriented cultural models were reproduced and continued to colonize "Others."

In immigration studies, newly arrived youth were often thought to resist the home culture and to completely assimilate to the dominant culture (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2010). Findings of this study demonstrated how newly arrived refugee students' identities were contextually mediated. The figured world of difference was full of powerful, deeply naturalized institutional acts, artifacts, and pathways for refugee students to negotiate and orchestrate who they were and who they could be. The cultural models and generic

characters found within that figured world were not simply “mental blueprints” stored in educators’ minds; rather, they are embedded in daily educational practices (Holland et al., 1998). It is vital to understand the figured world of difference and its key artifacts because it has significant educational and social implications in the lives of students and restoring educational equity. As Gee (2008) stated, “saying a child does not know how to speak her own native language correctly has implications about that child, her abilities and her deficits—and these carry over into how she is treated in school and society” (p. 24).

It is critical for future studies to focus on developing and implementing carefully designed schoolwide culturally relevant pedagogies for refugee students because “while members of groups that have experienced historical exclusion, contempt, or obloquy, they may indeed need social practices in order to flourish” (Appiah, 2006, p. 20). Effective culturally relevant pedagogies may facilitate minority students’ academic achievement, affirm fluid identities, and assist both students and teachers to develop critical perspectives toward social inequalities reproduced in schools (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Goals, interests, and funds of knowledge that refugee communities bring into schools can and should be used for expansive academic and social learning opportunities for newly arrived refugee students (Moll, Soto-Santiago, & Schwartz, 2013). In addition to rich cultural resources that refugees bring to schools, attention should be paid to the powerful streams that refugee students are forced to deal within local cultural-historical-spatial contexts. Attending to the systemic tensions between refugee students’ social and personal experiences—the complexity of individuals—and the institutionalized cultural models and practices—the complexity of the context—can provide invaluable opportunities for systemic transformation to form inclusive and democratic school cultures from the ground-up that will benefit all students and educators.

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