

Domestic Intercultural Immersion Community of Practice: Embracing the Somali Immigrant Experience in Midwest Public Schools

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Photos Courtesy of Mai Lee Kha and Dr. Dandrielle Lewis

Introduction

The intent of this domestic intercultural immersion experience is to equip participants with:

- Information about Somali culture, traditions and religion from scholarly presentations, readings, observation and interaction with Somali Americans.
- An awareness of how learners' race/ethnicity, background knowledge and experiences, culture, religion, and gender impact school environments.
- An understanding of the complexities of urban immigrants' lives and large populations of one culture in one school (i.e., high incidence population of non-native speakers).



Photo Courtesy of Dr. Dandrielle Lewis

My Experience

2016 marks my second year as a student research collaborator for the Somali Domestic Intercultural Immersion Experience. I began my student research experience my third year. When I started, I expected that I would learn about Somali culture and way of life. What I did not expect was that my life would be changed as well. My first year participating was filled with new knowledge and understanding of the Somali people, Islam, and refugee experiences. Then, it evolved into discovering more about my own identity as Hmong whose parents were refugees too. When I entered into the Somali community, I saw myself in the community. To me, so much of the Hmong culture and Somali culture were alike. I could not believe how well my experiences and identity connected with my new Somali friends.

This realization propelled me to spread awareness about refugee experiences, prejudices against Islam and my personal experiences with the Somali community members. After my first year participating in the SDIIE, I have done countless interviews and have been invited to classrooms to speak about the benefits of domestic intercultural immersions particularly this one that emphasizes Somali refugees in the Twin Cities. Now that it is my second year in this research, I serve as a student leader for the participants who went on the immersion. Saying yes to do research and entering into a culture I thought was completely different from my own positively changed my perspectives on life forever.

Research Questions

- To what degree did learners grow in their understandings of the Somali culture in regards to history, language, traditions and customs?
- Was the program effective and in what ways was it effective?
- Did participants show increased competencies providing appropriate and equitable educational services to students of color?
- Did the learners develop a sense of equity in public education for non-native English speakers and a willingness to advocate on behalf of non-native English speakers and their needs?

Methodology

- The research consisted of 10 participants from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.
- Post-immersion experience surveys, which focused on multicultural awareness and the Somali culture were collected and analyzed.
- Group interviews and artifacts were gathered in order to provide further evidence in support of the quantitative findings.
- Data analysis was done using open-coding techniques and comparisons of pre- and post-test means.
- Data collection occurred over a 4 week period.



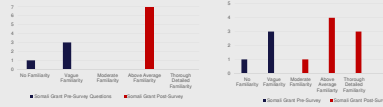
Photo courtesy of Mai Lee Kha



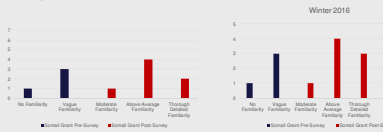
Photo courtesy of Dr. Aram deKoven

Major Findings

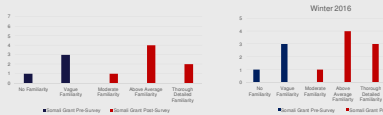
- degree of FAMILIARITY with Somali Culture (patterns of daily life, food, and/or housing)
 - The data on the left side is from Winter of 2015. The data on the right is from Winter of 2016. As you can see, there is commonality in both. Both data shows significant improvement of familiarity after participating in SDIIE.



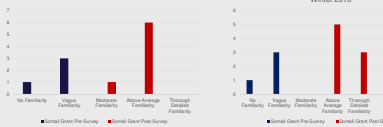
- degree of FAMILIARITY with the following topics: Somali traditions and culture
 - What started off as no to vague familiarity later shows that after participating in SDIIE, students improved their familiarity of Somali traditions and culture.



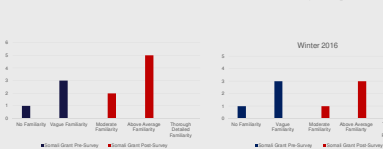
- degree of FAMILIARITY with the following topics: Values prevalent in the Somali community
 - Again, we can see that there is an improvement of familiarity of Somali community values after participating in SDIIE. During the SDIIE 2016, only one student demonstrated moderate familiarity. While three students claimed thorough familiarity.



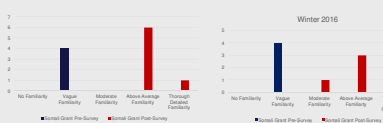
- degree of FAMILIARITY with the following topics: The roles and expectations for men and women in Somali culture
 - Significant changes are seen in these graphs. Students increased in familiarity with gender expectations after their involvement in SDIIE. In SDIIE 2016, three of eight total students claimed thorough familiarity.



- degree of FAMILIARITY with the following topics: Social and political events in Somalia currently in the past 20 years
 - There is an increase in thorough familiarity since last year's SDIIE participants. This could be from various reasons such as added relevant activities (i.e. new guest speakers) that engaged participants.



- degree of FAMILIARITY with the following topics: Reasons the Somalis left Somalia. In SDIIE 2016, half claim they are thoroughly familiar.



Testimonies

- What did you learn about the teaching reading/literacy to non-native English speakers?
 - "In the schools I learned that teaching English is very difficult to non-native speakers. The children were easily, and justifiably, frustrated often and struggled with content that some of the other children in the class could understand fairly quicker. I learned that teaching ESL takes a lot of patience and also a deep understand of both English and the other native language. In the ESL class I shadowed one day, I noticed that the kids felt very comfortable with the teacher and the communication between them was simple and much faster when they were speaking Somali." -Regina C., 1st year student
- Did you have a change of understanding about Somali people, culture and Islamic beliefs after participating in SDIIE? How and in what ways?
 - "Yes, it completely changed my entire view of Islam. Before I had almost no emotion other than fear and disgust toward Islam, but I have now come to appreciate the religion and the values that it holds. I also came to change my view regarding the difference between Somali Americans and Black Americans as well as other people of color. I learned that although they come from a similar geographical region, they have many differences and face extremely different adversities." -April B., 1st year student
- What did you learn about Islamic beliefs?
 - "This was my absolute favorite topic to learn about. I am pretty religious myself, so I really enjoy learning about other types of religion. I went to a Catholic elementary school and have been drilled with the religion my entire life. Although I do enjoy it, I am always about curious others... My mother is not the same religion as my dad and brother, so it is interesting to learn about the differences. Although we did learn about many aspects of the Islamic faith, the most important I thought to be the five doctrines of faith, the five pillars of practice, gender roles within the faith, and the actual prayer. Each of these shows us how cool and unique our world is. How there is a worldwide framework in everything we do, in this case a framework of God, our almighty creator. Everyone has this framework but show their uniqueness through their own beliefs and values of one's own culture." -Brianna J., 1st year student
- What did you learn about the immigrants' experiences in the Twin Cities and the challenges of being an immigrant in the US today?
 - "From what I heard, Somali-Americans seem to feel accepted in Minneapolis and they are being pushed to reach a higher education and truly feel like members of this society. But an upsetting fact is that they feel the need to convince the general public that they are not terrorists in response to Al-Shaba videos. Having to convince Americans that they are friendly and safe is an ongoing battle these immigrants must face on a daily basis. Older family members of the students might not speak English and that is a struggle for students who need help with homework." -Amy B., 4th year student

Suggestions

- Maintaining relationships built from participating in the immersion is a must after leaving the Somali community. These relationships will expand the knowledge of the participants about Somali experiences and aid in advocating for the Somali community as well as the research.
- The pre and post surveys must be sent out to participants immediately after the first meeting and final week of the immersion experience respectively to avoid any impurities that can skew the data finding.
- Guest speakers should have applicable presentations for participants who will be entering the Somali community.
- Teaching participants how to critically reflect about one's own culture is important when entering into a different culture. This will enhance perspective-taking and build awareness about multi-ethnicity.

Limitations

- Due to technical difficulties, not every participant was able to complete the Somali Grant Pre-Survey questions. Therefore, there were only four total Pre-Surveys used in the 2015 data as well as the 2016 data.
- In the 2016 data, one participant did not complete the post-survey questions.

Implications

- Direct interpersonal and intercultural experiences contribute greatly to increased respect for cultures other than one's own. These types of programs serve to enhance participants' understanding of culture from myriad perspectives while building comfort, awareness and acceptance for other cultural patterns.
- The results of this study support the importance of providing undergraduate students with more expertly designed and facilitated domestic intercultural immersion experiences. These types of immersion experiences will help college students build multicultural awareness, competencies, and comfort while working with students from diverse backgrounds.
- Immersion program provide mirrors that help students critically reflection on their own relationship to privilege, power, and opportunity, awareness and competencies for college students.

