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Original Paper

Immigrant Students Reflections on Their Failed Results from Compulsory School: Reconsidering Multi-dimensional Solutions (Note 1)

Getahun Yacob Abraham^{1*}

¹ Department of Educational Studies, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

* Getahun Yacob Abraham, Department of Educational Studies, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to investigate reasons students with an immigrant background in one Swedish high school gives for their failure in some subjects at the end of their compulsory education. An interview with 18 students with an immigrant background is used as a method. According to the students, schools' employment of substitute teachers without subject knowledge, reducing and firing competent teachers and less time for Swedish language lessons are reasons for failure in relation to schools. Other reasons given that affect results relate to family issues; leaving their country of origin, having many siblings and not getting enough attention from parents, parents inability to help them with school work, limited family financial resources and social obligations to support family members in their country of origin. In their residential area; not meeting persons with Swedish origin, lack of recreational facilities and meeting place, higher unemployment and crime rate are emphasized as affecting their lives and influencing their results. Based on the research findings and reviewed literature, students' failure is mainly related to school, family and residential areas. The problems vary to a great extent, hence, the solutions should also be multi-dimensional.

Keywords

compulsory school, failed results, family, immigrant students, residential areas

1. Introduction

Due to increased migration and arrival of students without experience of the Swedish schools system, school working language and the social setting, there are concerns about immigrant students' achievement. In the Swedish school system students with immigrant background are over-represented

among those who finish compulsory school with non-passing grades (Skolverket, 2004; Jonsson & Rudolphi, 2011). Different explanations are given for students' failure, such as individual weakness, parents' lack of education, unemployment, and lack of social and economic capitals. There are also claims that a structural problem could be the main contributing factor to the low achievement. While the problem is significant, there are limited studies conducted to provide more knowledge on this issue (Bunar, 2010).

Some studies were undertaken in Sweden and the USA on this issue, that show the role of schools and residential areas, in relation to student results (Bunar, 2011; Nieuwenhuis & Hooimelier, 2016). There are also studies with a focus on how parents' education and access to different social capital could influence their children's success in education (Bergren, 2013; Behtoui & Neegaard, 2016).

Different reasons could be given for the low achievement of students. Class size could be one of the contributing factors. A study by Fredriksson and Öckert (2008) shows that an increase in teachers' density and reduction of class size showed an increase in students' achievement. Norberg-Schönfeldt (2008) based on Bonesrønning (2003), shows the negative effect of class size on students' achievement. Bonesrønning's (Ibid), research, based on data from Norwegian schools, shows 30 students per class was a standard, and concludes that the negative effect of class size depends on the context and group of students.

Grading of students' work should not always be taken at face value. Lekholm and Cliffordsson (2008), discuss in their article that grading is sometimes influenced by other factors than the real skills. By citing literature from the field, they highlight the following aspects,

... Manke and Loyd (1990) showed that different student characteristics, such as effort, behavior, personality, and homework completion, are commonly taken into consideration when teachers assign grades. According to Nava and Loyd (1992), student classroom behavior, non-content academic skills, and student personal characteristics may also be of importance when teachers assign grades. Additional aspects may be punctual submission, completion of assignments, and working hard both in and out of class (e.g., Cox, 1995; Pilcher-Carlton & Oosterhof, 1993; Lekholm & Cliffordsson, 2008, p. 182).

Some subjective judgments indicated above could contribute to the high or low grading of students work.

In discussing the students' family situations, having many siblings does not prove to have strong significance for success or failure (Behtoui & Neegaard, 2016), while another study presents that, if a child is not the eldest in the family of many siblings it could have a negative impact on the child's educational achievement (Norberg-Schönfeldt, 2008). In addition to the number of siblings, growing up in a single parent household can negatively influence students' achievement (Ibid).

The importance of parents' knowledge of language, culture and the school system for the success of their children are described below:

... If parents were born abroad and are not fluent in the new country's language, this will most

likely be a disadvantage for the child's performance. Also, cultural distance to the host country and lack of experience with the school system will make parents less prone and less able to take part in their children's schoolwork... (Jonsson & Rudolphi, 2011, p. 488).

In addition to the above-mentioned aspects, there are other important resources that families need for the success of their children's education. Behtoui and Neegaard (2016) discuss the contribution of "extra-familial social capital" which could be gained through "parental networks", "active membership in social organizations" and through "friendship networks". These are resources, difficult to get access to, without actively working to gain them.

The residential area where the family is located influences the student's achievement. Brännström (2008), identifies an increasing residential segregation in recent decades in the three major cities in Sweden, Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmo. He further explains the impact on the youth living in these areas; that they are influenced by "role models and peers' behavior". According to him, this has its own impact on the individual student's performance in school.

The main concern of the study is to get the students' versions of the reasons for their failed grade. Their views on having failing grades are given in relation to school, their family situation, and residential areas. Both educational, family and societal perspectives are considered.

For the study, I interviewed students in one vocational high school in a big city in western Sweden. The interview was aimed at students with an immigrant background, who arrived in Sweden 3-5 years before the larger migration to the country in 2015. These students attended Swedish compulsory school, and during the interview they studied at one professional high school. In this high school, they have the possibility to improve the result of the subjects they failed in and they could train in electrical, mechanical and other professional subjects. The interviewed students failed in one or more subjects at the end of their compulsory school (ninth grade) before they joined this high school.

1.1 Aims & Research Questions

The aims of the study are to find out how these students are reasoning about their failed grades and how they view their school, the condition in their family and their residential situation. Hopefully, the findings from this study can add to the general knowledge on how these students perceive their results, schooling, family situation and residential areas. Those who are working to improve the students' achievements and schools' inclusion of immigrant students could also gain from the study.

The study will attempt to answer the following questions:

What school-related issues do the interviewed students mention as contributing factors to their failing grades in school?

How do they explain their family situation as a contributing factor to their failure?

What kinds of explanations do they provide concerning the influence of their residential areas with regards to their results in school?

While examining the problem from different perspectives, I would also like to argue on the relevance of the societal or multi-solution approach to deal with the problem. In the coming sections, I will first

present the ecological model as a perspective for the study. Then I will proceed to some details on the method I used, followed by the results of the study with some quotations from the students and finally a summary and discussion on the results of the study.

2. Theoretical Perspective

Even if the focus is on their grades and school situation, to understand the reality of the students, there is a need to understand the holistic situation of each interviewed pupil. To achieve this the ecological model will be considered as a theoretical framework (Anderson et al., 2004; Hamilton & Moore, 2004; Rutter, 2006; Nilson & Bunar, 2015). The ecological model will provide the opportunity to look closer at the student's relation to their classmates, teachers, family members, and neighborhood.

The ecological model for studying refugee children is described by Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen and Frater-Mathieson (2004) as follows:

... A key feature of the model is the distinction between pre-migration, trans-migration, and post-migration factors. Pre-migration factors include those characteristics and experiences of the refugees that occurred prior to leaving the home country. Trans-migration factors include those experiences that occurred in the transition from home to host country. This could be a short transition that includes the plane trip from home to host country or could involve years spent hiding or in refugee camps prior to moving to the host country. Finally, post-migration factors include those experiences that occur upon arrival in the host country. These factors are described, at each point in time, in terms of Bronfenbrenner's theory, which places the individual in his or her social and ecological context (Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen, & Frater-Mathieson, 2004, pp. 7-8).

Our model helps identify the relevant factors and organizes them in two ways; first at a point in time—pre-migration, trans-migration and post-migration—and secondly by utilizing Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development to identify an individual, familial and broader ecological factors, factors that influence the child's development across the three migratory phase (Ibid, p. 9).

This model provides the opportunity to investigate the whole process in the immigrant child's life, the pre-migration, trans-migration, and post-migration. The students targeted in the study lived for some years in Sweden and attended a part of their school in the country. To study their situation, the focus is on the post-migration period.

In addition to the ecological model, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital and reproduction will be used. As some of the interviewed students have been in Sweden and attended Swedish schools for a short time, they lack the linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) for success. It is also possible that those who are born in Sweden, as well as those who arrived later, could lack the valuable and necessary economic, cultural and social capital, which could lead to the reproduction of the existing underclass and societal structure (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

3. Method

The study used interviews as the main method (Kvale, 1996; Bryman; 2004; Loseke, 2013) and supplemented it with some relevant literature on the subject. In the beginning, I interviewed 21 students and later on data for three of them was taken out from the study. These three students as the rest of the group members have an immigrant background and volunteered to be interviewed, but in my review of the interviews I found out that two young men worked as assistant teachers in the school and one female student declared at the end of the interview she had passed all the subjects at the end of the compulsory school. Each of the remaining 18 interviewed students failed in one or more subjects at the end of the compulsory education. This qualified them to the aims of the study and to be able to answer the research questions.

The students were informed about the purpose of the study and their consent to participate was gained. Information to them included that they will be anonymous in the study, as well as information about their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Also they were informed that the collected data will be used only for research purpose (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). The names of students mentioned in the results of the study are pseudonyms. The name of the high school they attended during the study and the names of the schools they attended before they joined this school are not mentioned.

The following tables provide information on the students' age, sex, and country of birth. It also includes the students' parents' country of birth.

Table 1. Students' Age, Sex, and Country of Birth

Age	Sex		Total
	Female	Male	
16		1	1
17	4	4	8
18		2	2
19		3	3
20		4	4
Total	4	14	18

Table 2. Students' and Parents' Country of Birth

	Students country of birth	Parents country of birth
Afghanistan	3	3
Bosnia		1
Eritrea	1	1
Gambia and Sierra Leone		1
Iraq	1	3

Lebanon		1
Serbia	1	1
Somalia	4	5
Sweden	6	
Syria	1	1
Turkey	1	1
Total	18	18*

Note. *36 individuals (All parents are born outside Sweden).

In the tables above we can see that out of the 18 interviewed students, only four of them are girls. Most of the students, six of them, are born in Sweden and have parents with immigrant backgrounds. Four students and five parents are born in Somalia.

4. Results

Students gave various reasons as to affected their schooling. Some of the reasons are linked to their schools, family relationships and community structures. Social structures were mentioned in relation to the living areas of the students.

During the interviews, some of the students gave detailed information on their living situation and experience in their country of origin, what happened to them on the way out of their country of origin and in the country of transition. However, the interview and their replies focused on their life in Sweden. This included their education, family situation, and their present residential area. There are differences from individual to individual both in their experiences and with regard to their way of telling their stories. Some replied briefly to the interview questions while others gave detailed information both on their past and present situation.

The results of the study are organized in a way that will help to answer the research questions and they are presented under different themes; schooling, family situation and residential areas.

4.1 Schooling

Six of the eighteen, interviewed students are born in Sweden to immigrant parents. The other students came to Sweden three to five years before the interview. Most of them attended schools before they came to Sweden while others had no schooling before they came to Sweden. One student said that he had no opportunity to go to school in the country of origin and started school after he arrived in Sweden at the age of 14. During the interview, he said that within two years he learned to write in Swedish, English and his native language Arabic.

Most of the interviewed students explained that they have good relationships with their classmates and teachers. They expressed themselves by saying “all my teachers were positive”, “they are helpful and fought for us” and “they were all kind and helped me”. Three students said they had difficult relationships with their teachers. Two of them motivated their poor performance in English with a

problematic relationship with their English teachers, while the third student explained that the school had many temporarily employed teachers with whom he could not establish good contact.

In their relationships with classmates, most are positive, but one student says he “does not have contact with those who are not serious and those that play truant”. Another student (Faisal) explains more how his contact with his classmates has been:

... There, in the beginning in a place called A, they say they are not racists, but they are and in the gym, they tried to push me down all the time. The students they do not want me to play better than them and I am stronger than them, they do not want to see it, they want to depress me. They start bitching and said bad things behind my back. Everyone in the class was talking behind my back that I’m blah blah blah... I left for B for one year. After a year when I came back to A, they started to say that I’m not that person they were talking about. They began to say that I’m a nice guy and they started to discover me. After a year, they began to understand me and say I’m not the guy they thought I was from the beginning. Yes! they understood I’m like everyone else who wants to be somebody in the future.

I do not know why they were so against me. In the beginning, they did not have immigrants in the school, they only had those who had been born in Sweden that can speak good Swedish, but I could not and did not talk to them, joked and stuff. I also smoked and they were saying I smell blah blah blah... Then they started saying he may have had problems in his homeland, understood me a little bit. In the end, it was fine.

In addition to relational problems, these students raised other problems that they considered schools should do something. In the school, the students have observed that the number of students increased, but no change in the number of teachers. Another student describes that in another school, because of economic problems in the school, some teachers including a popular and good mathematics teacher were forced to leave, and after that many students gave up their struggle to improve their knowledge in mathematics. There are also schools described to have new substitute teachers weekly, and because of this, students could not establish a good relationship with any of them. One student (Kadier) says it’s not just that there are many substitute teachers, but most of them could not teach a subject such as Swedish. Kadier says “... But I have not had good relationships with my teachers, there were new teachers every week. I often quarreled with my teachers. I’ve had a Swedish teacher who was not good at Swedish...”.

Another student is also critical of how the school manages Swedish language education. Mustaffa says:

I myself did not learn much in school. I learned outside the school for example, at home, on the streets, through music. In school, I have not learned Swedish. There are only two classes a week, each lesson was for 45 minutes. It is such a short time in order to learn the language. It would better if we had a Swedish lesson daily. We have a lot of subjects and we have to work with them also which is why we have had limited time for the Swedish language. They should have given us

extra time every day for Swedish after 3 o'clock, but you get tired if you stay at school after 3 o'clock.

Students recommend improving the education of young people from immigrant backgrounds, and state that schools need to have more teachers and more material resources. With material resources they referring to libraries, rooms, and various school facilities.

In their discussion on why they fail, some give the short time they have been in Sweden as the main reason. According to these students, the short period they have been in the country is not enough to master the language. There are also some who say that they do not take school seriously and others who say there are other problems in their lives that need more attention than school.

In a question about them receiving a fair grade in their examination, 16 out of 18 said that they were given a fair rating. They said the responsibility for their failure should fall on themselves or the context, not on their teachers.

4.2 Family Situation

There are variations in family relationships for the students. As it was mentioned earlier some came to Sweden alone, some with their parents, and some are born in Sweden to immigrant parents. The majority of them live with both or one parent and have more than three siblings. Most of the parents have no formal education and they are unemployed or attend language courses. The family situation, affects students' education in various ways.

In some families, there are parents who can help with homework, but a large number of parents cannot do that. Students with older siblings get help from them. There are also possibilities that some cousins and other relatives who live in the same area takes responsibility for helping these students with their home works.

For those who have many siblings, their parents are described as not being able to give enough attention to each child. Even if there are not many siblings in some families, one child could feel a lack of sufficient attention from parents. A student said, "I have a younger sister and an older brother. The one in the middle always has a tough time. The youngest one is the most loved child".

As some of the parents are unemployed, attending a Swedish language course and looking for work, they lack sufficient financial resources to fulfill the needs of their children. In addition to the lack of financial resources for themselves and their children, many of these families share their inadequate resources with relatives who live in their home countries, where they, also have meager means of survival, including, sick people who need care or elderly parents who have no pension. The responsibility, for the most part, is on the adults in the families, but there are also some students who share the responsibilities with their parents. A student from Somalia says, "Mom sends money to my grandmother", another student from Somalia gives similar information, "My dad sometimes send money to relatives" and a third student from Afghanistan explained the situation and his responsibility, "I have relatives still in Afghanistan. I work with distributing advertisements on the weekends to be able to send the money I get to them".

A student whose parents are from Turkey, describes the situation:

I have relatives still living in Turkey, it is not only me but we help those who need a support from us. In our family there is no money that only belongs to my father or belongs to my mother, it is the whole family's money, we help in case there are some needs. I work in my cousin's pizzeria to earn some money, and that money is also a part of the money we are using to help those who are in our homeland.

Another situation that seems to affect students' schooling and their results is the students' or their parents' planned or unplanned movement or leaving their country of origin. Hasan, a student with parents from Somalia describes his situation as follows:

When I was eight we moved to England and at that time I could speak Swedish.

Seven years later, in 2013, we were in Sweden for my brother's wedding and we remained here.

In Sweden, I started speaking English with people, until I started speaking Swedish again.

Another student, Basim, described his family situation and the impact of leaving Turkey on his schooling:

I have gone to school in Turkey for six years and then I moved to Denmark and then my life crashed. I was the smartest in my class and my teacher asked me if I should stay with him instead of moving to Denmark. But I thought I should get a residence permit in Denmark, but could not. Except for my dad, who has had a residence permit, the rest of us family members traveled forth and back between Denmark and Turkey every three months. My sister was born in Denmark and she received a residence permit. I, mum and my brother did not and we were there as tourists every three months before we moved to Sweden.

As we can see above, there are different conditions that affected and are affecting the schooling for some of the students. Many of them are conscious of their goals and are hardworking, and despite facing different problems, they are facing are determined to move forward to achieve their different goals.

The general impression the interviewed students give regarding their parents show some kind of understanding and in some cases strong solidarity with their parents. One student expressed it as follows:

I see my father as a role model. He is working all the time, and even if my parents are separated, he tries to make sure my sister and I are doing well. He was there for us all the time. My mom, too, she has been struggling to support us all her life. I usually say I have a king and a queen in my life and they are my dad and my mom.

4.3 Residential Area

Residential areas affect students in different ways. Most of the students live in suburbs with different problems. What is happening in their area of living affects students' education directly or indirectly.

Some of the students are positive about their suburbs. One student says, "I like my area because I've grown up there and it's home". Other students argue in favor of their areas by comparing them with other troubled suburbs nearby. They believe that their suburb is calmer than the others.

There are some students who emphasize that it is difficult to have contact with the Swedes in the area where they live. Mohamed emphasizes this as follows:

I think that immigrants must try to contact Swedish people. If you are only with those from your country of origin you are talking your mother tongue. If you talk with Swedes, you have the opportunity to learn the Swedish language and it makes it easier for you in school. I always lived in the Swedish area and it made it easier for me to learn the language. The language is always the foundation for an education.

Nasser, one of the students expresses his frustration by saying: "In my area nowadays there is no job, and many young people turn to crime and drugs. I think it is difficult". There are also students who describe the lack of recreation centers, there is no meeting place for young people to get help with homework, play various indoor games or hang around to talk.

In addition to the lack of venues that are described above, in some areas, it is difficult to live. Feisal who lives in one of the suburbs, describes how he sees his area: "... I am not interested in the people who live there. I have seen it with my own eyes those who sold drugs in the tram. I cannot hang out with them. I do not like the area. A lot of things happen there". Rashid describes another suburb like this:

... because of the reputation I would not stay there when I have a family. I do not want my children to grow up there. It is not a common Swedish residential area, it is not considered a Swedish area ... As soon as you go out, there will be young children going out to rob someone. I do not desire my children grow up there. As soon as you go out there is a bad atmosphere and I do not know why.

There are both differences and similarities between different suburbs. In some suburbs, students describe deteriorating security situations. They describe the presence of weapons and drugs for sale. Nasser says "Before there were youth recreation centers, I used usually went there. It is getting worse and worse. People kill each other, you become afraid. Previously I felt safe and went out at night, but now it's difficult ...".

One of the student, Hassan, describes the situation in his area as follows:

... Nothing to do in our spare time. A few years ago, everyone was out on the football field. From nowhere shootings began and people are not there now, everyone is at home or out of range, in town. When I came back from England after some years, during the summer all the families were out, friends, small children and the elderly were all in the field and we played soccer for several hours. Now no one is there, it is empty. People can be out there, but not like before.

When I came back after a few years abroad in 2013, the summer was good. We played outside and then we ate in the nearby restaurant. One day when we were playing a soccer, came to a

scoter and those two who were on it started screaming and everyone stopped to look at them and they started shooting in the air. The two shooters were masked. Now there is an in-house football on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays. It's just that, everything else has disappeared. It's boring to live there.

Even if there are some students who are positive about their residential areas, in most cases, descriptions of their residential areas show how the interviewed students are disappointed with the development in their living areas. The disappointment is due to lack of essential services that could make life easy for them and the deteriorating security situation. In some cases, young people are not only disappointed, they are afraid for their lives. It is impossible to say this cannot affect their school attendance and performances.

5. Summary and Discussion

This study aimed at finding out how 18 students in one technical high school are reasoning about their failure in one or more subjects at the end of comprehensive school and how they relate their school, family and residential situations in relation to their school performance. The results of the study indicate inadequate resources, services and in some cases relations with their peers in schools as the major causes for their failure. The reasons given in relation to their family includes coming to a new country, moving back and forth to other countries, having many siblings, parents educational background, lack of financial resources and their families taking responsibility for relatives remaining in the country of origin. Segregated residential areas with a higher rate of unemployment, lack of future hope, high crime rate and lack of recreational facilities for the youth are mentioned.

The students described some deficiencies in their schools' ways of dealing with the language courses, resources, and administrative weaknesses. According to the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2004), the students' knowledge of the Swedish language influences their success in all subjects they are studying. These students, while describing the shortcomings of their schools, did not put the responsibility for their failure on others. They did not even emphasize the structural problem in the school system—they rather put the blame for their failure on themselves.

I am surprised that these students were not mainly accusing their teachers of the difficulties they experienced in their education process. It was not more than three students out of 18 who mentioned the problems they have had with their friends and their teachers. I wonder if the majority of them want to be polite and not say anything negative about their relationships with others, if they are genuine in their comments or if they understood that the school problem is only one part of their total problem.

Some researchers (Bergren, 2013; Behtoui & Neegaard, 2016) emphasize that parents' education and social capital can influence their children's educational success. The results of the interviews show that these students' parents lack of educational, cultural, financial and social capital in their new country have negatively influenced the students' results. Due to the language barrier, many parents were forced into unemployment. The students never blamed their parents for what they lacked, rather they

appreciated their determination to leave the difficult situation in their country of origin to start a new life in the host country.

The burden these students carry because of various problems experienced as individuals can have different effects on them. In the post-migration context (Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen, & Frater-Mathieson, 2004, pp. 7-8), separation from their childhood friends, not speaking the host country language, the weather and physical environment were among the difficulties the students faced. For many, their new residential location was difficult to comprehend. It was contributing to an alienation from the majority of the population (Safipour & Emami, 2011; Lindbäck & Sernhede, 2013). In addition to the alienation, they are expressing, their daily experiences and the stigma (Bunar, 2011; Lindbäck & Sernhede, 2013) that was related to living in these suburbs. For many, it is not safe to live in these areas today and others would like to leave as soon as situations allow them. There are also some who express they would never allow their children to grow up in these environments. They want to distance themselves and their next generation from reproducing (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) the segregated life they lived.

As mentioned earlier, students of foreign origin have many hurdles to complete compulsory school with passing grades. Even if there are individual variations, factors related to family, school, and residential areas have mainly influenced these students results (Skolverket, 2004). As the roots of the problem are multi-dimensional, the solutions will also need a cooperation between their families, schools, different societal institutions and government authorities.

I believe this study based both on literature in the field and empirical study highlighted a group of students' reflection on their failure in one or more subject in their comprehensive schools. In the results of the study there could be some relevant details that will help policy makers, practitioners and future researchers. However, I cannot claim this study to be sufficient in terms of reaching a wider conclusion on students with a foreign background who failed on one or more subjects when they concluded their comprehensive school.

A wider study by using more diverse methods than only an interview would provide more knowledge on this group of students. My study included students with an immigrant background who were in Sweden before a large number of immigrants arrived in 2015. I believe a future study that covers the large population of students, including those who arrived in 2015 and later, will give us a deeper knowledge on their experiences and their reflections.

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Note

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