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Driven by Dreams: Immigrant Stories of Education, a Gatekeeper Exam and a High School Diploma

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DRIVEN BY DREAMS: IMMIGRANT STORIES OF EDUCATION,
A GATEKEEPER EXAM AND A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA

By
Cindy H. Linzell

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High school in the United States is an important time in any student’s life. For many students, the four years of high school are framed with classroom success and the earning of a high school diploma. For others, it is a very difficult time in their lives.

In the state of Nebraska, students are not permitted to continue their education in a public school setting past the age of 21. This age limit creates a deadline where the passing of classes and graduation tests becomes crucial if these students hope to earn their high school diploma. While the majority of students will not be affected by this deadline, there are students in the Lincoln Public School system for whom this deadline is significant. These are the students who participated in this study.

This study focuses on a group of ten immigrant students who are close to aging out of Lincoln Public Schools, and have yet to meet the Reading Demonstration Graduation Exam (RDGE), a requirement for graduation, thus making the deadline significant. Interviews with each of the students were conducted to better understand the nature of the school experience and to explore how the RDGE impacts student choices, their school experiences and their future. These students, who range in age from 19-21, are immigrants from Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Kurdistan, North Sudan and Vietnam.
A detailed description of each student’s interview provides insight into the unique circumstances which brought them to this very difficult time period in their lives. A high school graduation predictor, utilizing age, RDGE status, ELL and/or Reading class level and status, are included for each student. A cross-case analysis of the students reveals two common topics: the importance of education and access to education. A third topic, becoming a minority, will also be discussed. Utilizing research, along with the data provided by the students and the cross-case analysis, recommendations for the RDGE are given. Further training for teachers and guidance counselors, with the help of immigrant community members, is also recommended.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

High school in the United States is an important time in any student’s life. There are countless decisions to be made, information to be learned in challenging classes, all while navigating through a ‘coming of age’ period. It is the time when American students are transformed into young adults, ready to be sent out into the world, embarking on the next phase of their life journey. For some students, the four years of high school are framed with classroom success. These students pass all of their classes, earn their diploma, and move into the work force, enroll in a trade school, a community college, or a four year college institution. And the diploma was, and is, a necessary component to make this transition.

For others, high school is wrought with troubling times, lack of success in the classroom, and the further complication of not graduating. In the state of Nebraska, students are not permitted to continue their education in a public school setting past the age of 21. This age limit creates a deadline where the passing of classes and tests becomes crucial if these students hope to earn their high school diploma. While the majority of students will not be affected by this deadline, meaning that they will earn their diploma before the age of 21, there are students in the Lincoln Public School system for whom this deadline is significant. Of the ten students in this study, all are immigrant students, all are affected by this deadline, and all are learning English.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the importance of a high school diploma as a benchmark toward continuing education is well documented. Without a diploma, higher education becomes virtually impossible (NCES, 2016). Additionally, a high school diploma affords students a better chance at economic stability
in the future. The NCES (2016) states, “In 2014, the median earnings of young adult high school completers were 20 percent higher than the median earnings of those without a high school credential ($25,000).”

Further evidence is provided by Perreira, Harris and Lee (2006), whose study found that when immigrant students earned a GED, and not a high school diploma, their labor force participation rates and earnings are more like that of high school dropouts. Therefore, in order to start this journey towards economic stability and further education, students need to obtain a high school diploma.

A similar, although more sentimental, statement of the educational process is described by Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova (2008):

“The immigrant journey is driven by dreams for a better life. Immigrant parents almost always frame their decision to move as a chance to provide better opportunities for their children. Most see education as essential for their children’s success in the new culture.” (p.30)

The importance of literacy, English literacy, and the role it plays in a student’s path toward a high school diploma and continuing after graduation, toward this dream, cannot be overstated. Strong literacy skills are crucial if the student is to graduate. This is especially true when literacy skills are attached to the passing of a gatekeeper exam. Additionally, course content, as well as the Reading Demonstration Graduation Exam for the school system, the RDGE, are available only in English, demonstrating further the importance of strong English literacy skills.
This study will provide insight into the unique circumstances in which these immigrant students find themselves: they are close to aging out of the public school system, and have not yet passed the Reading Demonstration Graduation Exam, and as such, may not graduate from high school. A literature review is provided as a framework, followed by the methodology of the study.

Following the Methodology, the students of this study are introduced through a detailed explanation of their interviews with the researcher. Following the interviews, a cross-case analysis reveals two common traits among the participants: the importance of education and access to education. The topic of becoming a minority, or racism, is also discussed due to the timely comments given during an interview.

Utilizing the literature, along with the data provided by the students and the cross-case analysis, recommendations are made to replace the RDGE with either a reading exam designed specifically for ELLs, or with performance assessments. And last, further training for teachers and guidance counselors, with the help of immigrant community members, is also recommended.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Cultural and Linguistic Capital

In the vast majority of American high schools, success is virtually unattainable without a good, working knowledge of the English language.

“Immigrant students, if they are indeed to be incorporated into the social and economic fabric of the nation, need the same rich and broad curriculum that most parents contend they want for their children. But they also need more: They need additional instructional time to acquire English skills and the standard curriculum; they need explicit instruction in academic English; they need explicit instruction in the culture and norms of American society; they need emotional and often social service support to address the traumas of refugee and migrant experiences; and they need a roadmap for navigating the educational and occupational systems in this country.” (Gándara & Rumberger, 2009, p.755)

However, bilingual students do not simply have deficits. They bring many skills with them from their home country, which includes their primary language (L1) and possibly additional knowledge of other languages, cultural knowledge and often, a different perspective on life (Gándara & Rumberger, 2009). Their language skills, along with their other attributes, are often not recognized in their pursuit of an American high school diploma. Pierre Bourdieu refers to this knowledge as linguistic and cultural capital. He borrows the terms market, capital, and profit from the language of economics and uses them to illustrate non-economic topics in more easily identified situations and comparisons (Bourdieu, 1991).
Just as in economics, cultural and linguistic capital are things to be sought after or possessed. The more you have of something viewed as worthwhile, the richer you will be. In the United States, white, Christian, middle-class culture and the English language hold the power. Possess them, and you are rich. The struggle for immigrants and immigrant students is that their language and culture do not hold mainstream linguistic and cultural capital. Their knowledge and information is not valued, so while they hold many skills, they do not hold the capital necessary, or the skill to challenge it, in order to succeed. Additionally, when they do possess the cultural and linguistic capital, knowledge of the American way and are proficient in the English language, their accent, intonation and way of speaking does not hold the same linguistic capital as a native English speaker (Bourdieu, 1991), making their acquisition of English a less valued commodity.

The absence of the cultural and linguistic capital that is most valued is especially problematic for immigrant students in the educational system. Bourdieu (1991) states:

“This system involves a certain kind of objectification in which formally defined credentials or qualifications become a mechanism for creating and sustaining inequalities, in such a way that the recourse to overt force is unnecessary. Moreover, by concealing the link between the qualifications obtained by individuals and the cultural capital inherited by virtue of their social background, this mechanism provides a practical justification of the established order. It enables those who benefit most from the system to convince themselves of their own intrinsic worthiness, while preventing those who benefit least from grasping the basis of their own deprivation.” (p. 14)
A high school diploma is an example of such a credential, a credential built on the credential of English proficiency. By earning a diploma, students are able to possess the capital to claim the benefit of the educational system.

**The Adolescent Immigrant Student**

Immigrant students have a unique set of hurdles to overcome, regardless of their age at the time of their arrival in the United States. The reason for immigration is also varied, whether it is for a professional job of a parent to a refugee situation where the family is fleeing danger to everything in between. Immigration is a social undertaking, as well as a financial decision. Family and community exert pressure and influence life-changing decisions (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008). This holds true for the sample of students from LPS, who are aged 19-21. Carhill, Suárez-Orozco and Páez (2008) discuss the unique characteristics of the adolescent, immigrant student. The authors state,

“Immigrant students who arrive in the middle and high school years encounter less support for language learning in school, have more complex academic content to learn, and have less time to catch up to their native-speaking peers before encountering gatekeeping assessments that have serious consequences for their future” (p. 1156).

These students negotiate home, school and peer contexts in different manners which are distinct from younger students and often negotiate multiple, social contexts (Carhill, Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2008). The authors completed a 5-year, longitudinal study to predict the academic performance of adolescent students named the Longitudinal
Immigrant Student Adaption (LISA). For this study, the authors used five criteria as predictors: 1) academic behavioral engagement, 2) English language proficiency, 3) father’s employment, 4) mother’s education, and 5) family structure (Carhill, Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2008 & Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, 2008). Each of these is briefly discussed in turn below.

**Academic behavioral engagement**: Highly engaged students are actively involved in their education, increasing their ability to reach their full potential.

**English language proficiency**: Academic English language skills affect student’s abilities to adapt socially at school. These skills are also highly predictive of academic success.

**Father’s employment**: Parents who are earning an income are better able to buffer their children from the risks associated with poverty. There is a positive relationship between a father’s employment and a student’s academic success.

**Mother’s education**: The level of maternal education has been related to language development. More educated mothers expose children to more academically oriented vocabulary and provide more opportunities to read, both of which are valued in school.

**Family structure**: Households that have two adult caregivers are generally more financially secure, as well as provide supervision, structure and guidance necessary for academic achievement. Immigrant children often live in varied or complex household configurations.

Additionally, there are three other factors which also influence the adolescent immigrant student: 1.) individual age and time in the United States, 2.) exposure to
English at home and in social situations, and 3.) environment of the school as measured by school quality factors (Carhill, Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2008 & Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, 2008). Again, each of these is discussed in turn below.

**Individual age and time in the United States:** The acquisition of a language generally ranges from between 5-7 years. Varying studies have shown that adult learners might acquire a language more rapidly than younger children. Further research on this topic is ongoing. However, regardless of the debate, adolescent children do not fit neatly into the studies’ dynamics. All students do continue to develop their language skills throughout (middle) and high school. Additionally, the more time a student is able to attend school, the better the chance for academic success. Age at the time of arrival will affect the length of time for schooling.

**Exposure to English at home and in social situations:** Older students, particularly adolescent, immigrant students, often choose linguistic environments that support the maintenance of their native language. More exposure, and usage, of English facilitates language acquisition. Limiting exposure to English will limit English acquisition.

**Environment of the school as measured by school quality factors:** School environment has significant influence on the engagement and performance of students. High poverty rates, school size, exposure to violence, poor school attendance are all factors which will negatively influence academic success. Adolescent immigrant students negotiate multiple social contexts that influence their individual academic success. Whether taken in combination, or individually, the proceeding lists have detailed those factors listed by Carhill, Suárez-Orozco & Páez and
Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova determine the outcome of these students’ school years.

Language acquisition is never easy, and these factors illustrate all of the influences that will affect the length of time necessary to become fully proficient in English. Conversational language skills can be learned within 1 to 2 years while academic language (that necessary for success in school) often takes more than 5 years (Cummins, 2001). If other influences not easily measured, such as frustration, embarrassment, anxiety, values and beliefs, are also included with these lists, it becomes clear why the adolescent immigrant student has a difficult time learning English and why they do not fit neatly into the time categories (Carhill, Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2008).

Home language environment is mediated by cultural values and practices, and learning the new cultural code can be stressful and exhausting. Cognitive aptitude is not a necessary trait for learning English, there are several skills or traits linked to better second language learning. These include “the ability to discriminate sounds, recognize the role and function of various parts of speech and the capacity to detect and generalize grammar rules (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008). Regardless of the language, “parental education affects the development of academic English, as learning to read and write in any language begins long before children enter school through engagement in activities with parents and caregivers who support language and literacy development” (Carhill, Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2008). There is also the need for culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching experiences, as well as the cultural knowledge of the immigrant students which they bring to the classroom (Ross & Chan, 2008).
With all of these indicators and factors, it would seem that immigrant students would never succeed academically, nor enjoy the educational experience. This, however, is not the case. They generally have very positive attitudes toward school, often more so than their native-born peers (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008). In addition to this positive attitude, immigrant students report that their parents are very supportive of their education. As an extension to the LISA project, immigrant students were asked the following questions which elicited the listed responses:

“For my parents, getting good grade is…” Of the responding students, 71% indicated very important and 22% indicated important.

“For my parents, finishing high school is…” Of the responding students, 86% indicated very important and 11% indicated important (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, 2008, p. 77).

The poverty level of a school is indicative of the success rate of ELLs. Adolescent immigrant students who attend high poverty schools are less proficient in academic English than are students attending schools with lower levels of school poverty. This dichotomy between high level poverty schools and lower level poverty schools creates de facto segregation of ELLs from English-speaking peers. In other words, their experiences mirror the learning experiences of all students (Carhill, Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2008). The percentage of free/reduced meals in these two schools is considerable. The poverty rate for children growing up in immigrant homes is double that of native-born families in the United States, and these immigrant families are often considered among the working poor (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008).
Gatekeeper Exams

With the onset of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), testing and assessment have been a topic of discussion and debate. It is an institutionalized component of our educational system. According to Menken (2008) teachers and administrators see raised standards and expectations as a major benefit of high-stakes testing for ELLs. For some, these students are finally receiving much-needed attention. At the same time, there are also concerns. For ELLs, exams are English as a foreign language and it is not fair to hold them to the same requirements as those born in the United States. The exam should be equal, but different for ELLs. Tests that are written for native speakers threaten the validity and reliability of the ELLs score this is especially unfair if the score is attached to high-stakes decisions like graduation.

Abedi (2010) also questions the validity of assessments for ELLs which have been developed for the mainstream population. Factors such as unnecessary linguistic complexity and cultural biases in the construction of testing materials can affect the outcome of the high-stakes assessments. These assessments are not sensitive enough to meet the needs of the ELLs. Additionally, testing has narrowed which variety of the English language is valued and promoted as the standard; this creates a sorting mechanism that positions ELLs and speakers of non-standard varieties of English at the bottom.

“The question for me is not whether we should have standards, assessment and accountability. The question is what kinds of standards, testing and accountability shall we have?” (Menken, 2008) While many have offered assessment options, Abedi states that one answer to this question is performance assessments. Performance assessments
give students a chance to demonstrate knowledge, while being less affected by linguistic complexity as language is not the only medium of response. Examples of performance assessments include hands-on tasks, assignments utilizing physical materials, and writing using illustrations. These assessments require additional scoring rubrics, and are not as easy to grade as multiple-choice exams, however, the results are valid for the assessment of ELLs.

A test is considered high-stakes when “its results are used to make important decisions that affect students, teachers, administrators, communities, schools and districts. In very specific terms, high-stakes tests are a part of policy design…that links the score on one set of standardized tests to grade promotion, high school graduation.” (Au, 2007) In Lincoln Public Schools, all students, native English speakers and bilingual, must pass the Reading Graduation Demonstration Exam (RDGE) in order to graduate and receive their diploma. Further explanation of the RDGE is provided in Chapter 3.

Utilizing the information presented in the literature review, the following questions are presented as purpose for this research study:

- What is the nature of the school experience of ELLs who are about to age out of Lincoln Public Schools and have yet to pass the RDGE (or equivalent)?
- How does the RDGE impact student choices, their school experiences and their future?
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

There are several programs in Lincoln Public Schools to help students succeed and complete their high school education. One of these programs is an ELL mentoring program in which ELLs are paired with a mentor who will work with them as they work to pass the Reading Graduation Demonstration Exam (RDGE). This volunteer program had been recently added to North Star High School by Jessica Capuano, an ELL Coach in LPS. (Note: Ms. Capuano is no longer working in LPS.) and mirrors the existing program already in use at Lincoln High School. ELL mentors meet once a week with a student who has not passed the RDGE and during these sessions, complete practice exams, providing feedback, explanations and clarification.

Participants

Students were selected for this study because they are aged 19-21, are close to aging out of the public school system, and have not passed the Reading Demonstration Graduation Exam (RDGE). Students volunteered to participate, and all ten students (7 male and 3 female) who volunteered were interviewed. All listed names are pseudonyms, chosen by the students. The students’ home countries are Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Kurdistan, North Sudan and Vietnam. Refer to Table 2 which contains more demographic information.

Permission

Permission was granted for this study through the University of Nebraska - Lincoln IRB. Parent consent form, student consent form, transcript for recruiting volunteers, and interview questions were submitted and approved by IRB. The original
study was designed for one school, North Star High School. However, during the IRB process, Lincoln High School was added, at the request of Lincoln Public Schools, in order to ensure confidentiality of the participants. This required additional approval by IRB of the parent consent and student consent forms, with the school name changed to reflect the second school. All approved documents are provided in the Appendix.

At North Star High School, Associate Principal, Megan Kroll, was assigned to help with this study. Under her direction, guidance counselors actively researched which students met the requirements of this study and these students were invited to an informational session, at which time they expressed their interest in participating. The Guidance Counselors also made all of the arrangements to have the eligible students who were willing to participate released from class to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted on a separate day.

At Lincoln High School, the Reading Advancement teacher, Laura Aten, was assigned to help facilitate this study. Ms. Aten met with the researcher, and then invited her to the Reading Advancement class. Interviews were conducted the same day as the introductory meeting.

Students were interviewed individually and all interviews were recorded. Field notes were also taken during the interview. Each interview consisted of the same questions, with follow-up questions added as needed for clarification. The interview was conducted in English. All information obtained during the interviews was self-reported and no attempt was made to validate or verify the data beyond the clarification questions.
At the conclusion of the interviews, detailed transcriptions were completed. Analysis of the data was done by hand, utilizing printed copies of the transcripts, highlighters, and the creation of charts. Initially, common topics or statements were highlighted in the transcripts using different colors to denote differing themes. These themes were then placed in charts with supporting evidence (topics or direct quotes) for further evaluation. The final chart contained the two most common themes, along with all of the supporting statements and information.

**Site Information**

Lincoln Public Schools is a financially stable school system which allots resources equitably across all schools. However, by virtue of location, North Star High School and Lincoln High School have the highest percentages of immigrant students, as well as free and reduced meals, which is used as an indicator of the poverty level for districts and schools. The following chart details this information for comparison. This information was obtained from the Nebraska Department of Education website for the 2014-15 academic year.

**Table 1.** Comparative statistics for state, public school district and high schools used in study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nebraska</th>
<th>Lincoln Public School District</th>
<th>North Star High School</th>
<th>Lincoln High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ELLs</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>57.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>54.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following are the Improvement Goals, provided by the School Building which are listed on the Nebraska Department of Education website, illustrate the importance of literacy and the focus of both schools.

*North Star High School:* Improve student achievement in Literacy across the curriculum with an emphasis on writing and non-fiction reading. Improve student engagement with an emphasis on instructional strategies.

*Lincoln High School:* The graduation rate will improve. All student will improve their reading skills in the content areas. All students will improve their academic skills in order to close the achievement gap.

**Reading Demonstration Graduation Exam (RDGE) and Equivalent Class**

All students in Lincoln Public Schools are required to pass the Reading Demonstration Graduation Exam (RDGE) to graduate. This test is an additional requirement beyond the state of Nebraska requirement for reading. Mainstream students may take this test as early as grade 8. ELL students must be in ELL Level 3 to be eligible to take the RDGE. The test consists of four articles, in English, taken from the Lincoln Journal Star newspaper, and the test is not available in the students’ home language(s). Each article is followed by ten questions, ranging from direct recall, to synonyms (or antonyms) for a word in the article, to summarization and/or purpose of the article. Students are not given a time limit in which to complete the test.

As an alternative to passing the RDGE, students may take the Reading Advancement class. This class consists of reading and vocabulary practice, as well as daily or weekly tests similar to the RDGE. Students must pass this class with a C+ or higher to meet the requirement.
Many of the ELL classes in Lincoln Public Schools do not count as a requirement toward graduation. ELL students will deny services in the ELL program in order to be eligible to take classes which do meet requirements toward graduation. This, however, means that the students are taking classes which require a better understanding of English than they possess. If students have denied ELL services, they are often placed in the Reading Elements class. This class offers the word analysis and comprehension skills need to improve their English, but it does not meet the reading graduation requirement.

**High School Graduation Predictor**

There is no single set of characteristics for a student who will graduate from high school. There are many routes and methods to accomplish this goal. However, the students in this study are all in a critical time period if they hope to meet the requirements for graduation from a Lincoln Public Schools high school. Therefore, each student’s possibility for graduation will be predicted using the student’s age (as best as it can be discerned), RDGE results, ELL or Reading class placement, time spent learning English in the United States (if possible):

**Green** - the RDGE test has been passed (or the equivalent Reading Advancement class), the student’s age indicates that the age requirement will not occur prior to meeting the requirements, and the student indicates that all class requirements are going well, and will be met.

**Yellow** – the RDGE test has not been passed (nor the equivalent Reading Advancement class), the student’s age indicates that the student still has more time to meet the requirements before turning 21 (at least one additional academic
year), the student indicates that classes are going well and all requirements will be met.

**Red** – the student will turn 21 at the end of this academic year (2016-17), the student has yet to pass the RDGE (or the equivalent Reading Advancement class), the student indicates class requirements are not going well and may not be passed.

The high school graduation indicators should not be interpreted as a guarantee of graduation, especially the green, where all indications are hopeful that the student will graduate. Factors outside the scope of this study may influence graduation.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter, details of each of the ten participants’ interviews are given. Table 2 is a summary of the participants’ names, home countries, years the participants have been in the United States and the number of years each participant attended school in his or her home country. Following the table, each interview is explored in depth for each of the participants. Finally, a thematic analysis of the interviews provides additional insight into lives of these immigrant students, their past, present and future.

The participants

Table 2. Home country, years in the U.S. and years attended school in home country.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Home Country</th>
<th>Years in U.S.</th>
<th>Years attended school in home country</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
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<td>4.0</td>
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<td>Jason</td>
<td>Iran</td>
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<td>Iraq</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khald</td>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Iraq</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
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<td>2.5</td>
<td>12.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plantig</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Kurdistan</td>
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<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
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<td><strong>10.2</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Dana

Of the ten students interviewed for this study, Dana was the most reserved. She answered all of the questions in a quiet voice that, at times, was very difficult to hear and did not make eye contact at any point during the interview. Dana is from Iraq and has been in the United States for two years; one and a half in Houston, TX and six months in Lincoln. She attended school through third grade in Iraq. Neither of Dana’s parents attended any school in Iraq. Because of this, Dana stated that her education is very
important to her. She stated that her classes are easy for her because she reads, studies at home, goes to school and studies at school.

Dana is currently in the Reading Advancement class, which she states is easy. She has not taken the RDGE test yet. She stated that she is confused by the test, since it is “the first time I take the test.” She is also very worried because she has heard that it is very difficult and she does not want to fail it.

Dana does not feel confident with her English skills. She stated that she sometimes doesn’t talk to anyone in English because she gets confused and feels that it takes her too long to speak. “Is long when I talk, that’s why sometime I didn’t talk to anyone.” She is not sure what it means to earn a high school diploma but she would like to earn one.

In the future, Dana would like to help people who don’t have families. Upon further clarification, this was discovered to mean orphans. She would like to take care of them and buy a house. If she has money, she would take all of them into her house. She stated that she wants to do this because she likes to help people.

High School Graduation Indicator for Dana – Red

Dana is placed in the Reading Advancement class and has never taken the RDGE, indicating that she does not have several opportunities to try and pass the test before turning 21. She has been learning English for two and a half years and is not confident in her English skills. While she is optimistic about her classes and states that she is doing well, her age and test status are critical.
Jason

Jason is from Iran and has been in the United States for three years. He attended school in Iran until the 12th grade, explaining the school system in Iran in detail. He stated that children are seven years old when they begin 1st grade. At some point (he couldn’t remember), students attend middle school, when they are around 15 years old, and then go to high school when they 16 or 17 years old. They attend high school for two or three years.

Jason is not sure of his parents’ exact schooling, but stated that neither his mother nor father attended high school due to the war between Iran and Iraq. “The war didn’t let them go to school.” He also stated that his father wishes he had been able to complete his education.

Jason is currently in the Reading Elements class, which will not meet the graduation requirement for reading. Because this class will not meet the graduation requirement, Jason must pass the RDGE. Jason has failed the RDGE twice, “because there are very, very hard questions for me that I can’t answer.” However, he feels that if he can take it again, he will “try his hardest and try to pass it.” If he doesn’t graduate, he will get a full-time or part-time job to help his dad.

Jason stated that it is very important for him to earn his high school diploma. “It means a lot. If I earn it, I can find a better job with a more, I don’t know how to say that, with a more, bank amounts.” Jason wants to earn money so that he can save and go to college.
With a good job, Jason can also save money to help his parents. Jason’s father works at a local chicken processing plant, and stated that he might try to get a job there if it is not possible for him to continue his education. He also stated, laughing, that he could also save money for his money for his future family, if he gets married.

High School Graduation Indicator for Jason – Yellow

Jason’s placement in the Reading Elements class indicates that he has an additional academic year to pass the RDGE and/or take the Reading Advancement class. He has been learning English in the United States for three years. He has already taken and failed the RDGE twice, yet remains optimistic about his classes and graduation.

John

John was born in Lebanon and lived there for six years, at which time he and his family moved to Iraq to be close to his grandparents. He has been in the United States for two years. He began school in Iraq at the age of six and attended school for twelve years. He has attended North Star High School for two years, arriving as a senior, and now, he stated, he is a “super-senior.”

John’s father attended school in Iraq for nine or ten years and his mother, he thinks, attended for three years. This was due to “the situation over there, 20 or 30 years ago.” Because his parents did not have the opportunity to finish their schooling, John states that education is “first in (our) family.” Because John’s parents did not have the opportunity to complete their education, “they want me to finish my education, so I can be successful.”
John completed and passed the Reading Advancement class last year. He has also passed the RDGE, which he stated was very hard, but he knew that he needed to pass it, “I have no other choice.” When asked how he felt when he passed the exam, John said that it “felt like I graduated.” It should be noted that there is no reason that John should have taken the RDGE if he had already passed the Reading Advancement class. This point was not clarified during the interview.

John has worked very hard to learn English. When he arrived in the United States, John’s cousin told him his English was not good. John viewed this as a challenge, and decided he wanted “to try hard and hard, until I get what I want.”

John plans on attending the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to study Civil Engineering. Because he has seen war in his home country of Iraq, he wants to return and start building, or repairing, the buildings, but states that he wants to continue living in the United States. He will “visit Iraq, just for business” although he still has family, grandparents, and uncle and several cousins, who live in Iraq.

John has experienced incidents of racism (partial transcript in the following section) during his time in the United States, stating that he knows that this is not the opinion of all Americans. He credits his counselors and teachers with helping him learn not only English, but also helping him with his “normal life.”

High School Graduation Indicator for John – Green

John has passed the RDGE as well as the Reading Advancement class. He has met this requirement for graduation prior to turning 21.
Josh

Josh was very excited to participate in this study and smiled the entire interview. Josh had volunteered to be interviewed immediately upon hearing about the study, and had asked if he signed the form that day if we could do the interview then. He had said he wanted to help any way he could. He said he was ready to answer any questions I had, because “I can’t believe what I say can really help others, like me, in the future.”

Josh is from Iraq and has been in the United States for one year and three months. He attended school for nine years while in Iraq, starting school at age six. He described the schooling experience as ‘switched,’ going four hours in the morning one week, and then four hours in the afternoon the next. There are many students in few schools, although at the time his family left Iraq, some new schools were being built.

Class size in Iraq is much larger than his classes at North Star H.S., especially compared to his ELL classes which often have around 9 students. Josh stated that there are often 40 students in a class in Iraq and that the students often do not pay attention and talk a lot. He stated that schools are safer in the United States, as is life, in general. “You can make a better life.”

Josh’s father attended school until middle school, and his mother attended elementary school. He stated that his father dropped out of school because he needed to work, and that at that time, he also got married. Because his parents were not able to finish school, they are very supportive of Josh finishing high school and attending college. “They support me a lot. The only thing they tell me is you have to finish your college and get your degrees.”
Josh is currently in ELL Level 3. He stated that the class is easy “if you listen.” He has not taken the RDGE yet, but thought he would take it this year. He didn’t feel stressed to pass the test, because if he didn’t pass it, he would try it again. Although Josh’s exact age is not known, this confidence indicates that he has at least one more year of high school before he is too old to attend the public schools.

While still in Iraq, Josh had learned to drive “big trucks.” His father began teaching him when he was eight years old, and when he was 17, he started driving. “I used to be driver, so here you can’t drive a truck right here in my age.” He added that he loved driving trucks and that he also loved the mechanics of the truck.

When asked about his future plans, Josh stated that he wanted to attend college, or go into the Army, or be a mechanic. He also stated that he wanted to own a car dealership, probably a Nissan dealership, because he loves the Nissan GTR. To do any of this, he stated that he ‘needed’ to get a high school diploma, it is very (his emphasis) important.

Josh emphasized many times during the interview that it is not safe in Iraq right now. When asked to clarify this, he stated “Well, the only thing I can say, is here it is safer. You can have a future. You have your future between your hands if you want. You can make your life better than anyone. I mean, it depends on you.” At the end of the interview, he re-emphasized this by saying, “Right now, it’s crazy back there. I just wanted to get out, for a better future.”
High School Graduation Indicator for Josh – Yellow

Josh has not declined ELL services, nor has he been placed in the Reading Advancement class. This indicates that he has at least one additional academic year before he turns 21. He has not taken the RDGE and has been in the United States learning English for a little more than a year.

Khald

Of the ten students interviewed, Khald was the only one born in the United States. Khald lived in Chicago, Illinois until he was age seven, at which time, he and his family moved to Jordan, which he clarified as a “little country in the Middle East” to be certain that I knew where he was talking about. All of Khald’s school experience was in Jordan until he returned to the United States to learn English. He has been enrolled at North Star H.S. for a little more than a year, has completed levels 1 and 2 of the ELL classes and is currently in Level 3.

Khald is currently enrolled in the Reading Advancement class, the alternative class to passing the RDGE. He stated that this is a very difficult class for him, since his first language is Arabic. It is also “the first time I’m going to see the word, so I don’t have the experience to figure out what the word meaning.” Khald feels that it is very important to pass the Reading Advancement class because he wants to graduate. “I’m working very, very hard to take the diploma.”

Khald was not permitted to take the RDGE when it was last given because he was a ELL level 2, and students must be in level 3 to take the test. Khald was told by a counselor that he didn’t think he would pass the RDGE, but that “we will try.” He
believed that he would take the test at the next offering (which was in early February, 2017).

Khald’s parents both finished high school, but did not attend a university. Khald’s father had been in the United States approximately 30 years prior to the family returning to Jordan when Khald was age 7. Both of Khald’s parents are currently living in Jordan. When I asked him if his parents had sent him to the United States to learn English, he stated that it was his choice to come here. “My education is the most important thing in my life. So I spend 2 years to take the English and the American diploma to get in the university.”

Besides working very hard to learn English, Khald works forty hours per week at Wal Mart in Customer Service. He regularly attends school which begins at 8:00 am until 3:00 pm, and then goes to work until 11:00 pm. He then completes all of his homework for the next day and studies for his classes. He works almost every weekend, which he says is good, because he needs the money to pay his rent and to buy food.

After graduation, which he hopes will be at the end of the summer term 2017, Khald plans to attend the University of Nebraska-Omaha to study Aviation, because “they have a good education at UNO.” He wants to be a commercial pilot. He believes that he will do it because he is getting a great education at North Star H.S. and he is learning English well. “They’re doing a great job at the ELL classes, and especially when you just came. You know, like the beginning, the beginning of my education, you have to know everything. And I’m still learning. (laughing) Of course, I’m still learning.”
High School Graduation Indicator for Khald – Red

Khald is enrolled in the Reading Advancement class and is ELL 3, indicating he is close to turning 21. He has not taken the RDGE. He indicates a sense of urgency in passing the Reading Advancement class, even though he says it is difficult.

Midya

Iraq is Midya’s home country and she has been in the United States for one and a half years. She attended school for 12 years, completing the 11th grade, prior to beginning school at North Star H.S. as a senior.

Currently, Midya is an ELL level 3 is in the Reading Advancement class. She feels that the class is easy, but the word definitions are difficult. She is 20 years old, making her placement in the Reading Advancement class strategic on the part of her Guidance Counselor. She has a better chance of passing the class this year than passing the test (which she would only be able to take once.) Midya has not yet taken the RDGE, but stated that she would probably take it this year (February 2017). She said that many students have told her that the test is hard to pass but feels she will try her best to pass the RDGE.

Midya stated that she will be very proud of herself if she earns a high school diploma in the United States. She would like to go to college to become a photographer because she loves to travel and visit other countries.

Midya stated several times that she is worried that she will not be able to graduate due to her age. She very much wants to finish her high school education, because this is what people in her country are fighting for, “they were fighting to finish school.”
High School Graduation Indicator for Midya – Red

Midya is enrolled in the Reading Advancement class and is an ELL 3, indicating that she is close to turning 21. She has been in the United States learning English for one and a half years. She indicates a sense of urgency that she will not be able to graduate prior to turning 21.

Penny

Penny is from Vietnam, and he and his parents have been in the United States for two and a half years, joining his grandparents who arrived earlier. He has attended Lincoln H.S. for two years and is a senior. Prior to that, he attended school in Vietnam for 12 grades (his term), but he did not graduate.

Penny is currently in the Reading Advancement Class. He was in the Reading Elements class, but had to drop it because it would not give him the needed requirement for graduation. He has failed the RDGE twice, making it crucial that he pass the Reading Advancement class. “If I don’t pass it, I don’t graduate.” Earning a high school diploma is very important to Penny, as well as to his parents, but he said that “it is challenging for me because I don’t have enough time to graduate.” This is Penny’s last year in school before he ages out of the public school system.

Penny’s father graduated from a university in Vietnam and his mother graduated high school. Although Penny’s parents are educated, they do not speak much English. His mother does laundry for other people, and his father works in a sofa factory, where he does not need to speak English because many of the employees speak Vietnamese. Penny
stated that his parents “need me to graduate to do a better job.” They do not want him to be a “worker,” but want a better life for him.

Penny has several extensive tattoos on his arms, which he designed himself. In the near future, he plans to go to California to get his tattoo license, because he loves to “draw and create beautiful things.” However, his primary goal is to attend Southeast Community College to study computer science, if he graduates (his words). Penny emphasized at the end of the interview that he wanted people to “understand how hard I working.”

High School Graduation Indicator for Penny – Red

Penny must pass the Reading Advancement class in order to graduate, a class which he states is very difficult. His statements indicate that he is already turned 21, or will very soon. He has failed the RDGE twice.

Plantig

Several of the students had a difficult time choosing a pseudonym for this study, but not Plantig. She stated immediately, with a huge smile, that she wanted to be called Plantig. Plantig means ‘butterfly’ in Kurdish, and “everyone loves butterflies because they are beautiful.”

Plantig is from Iraq and has been in the United States for one year. She attended school in Iraq for 11 years. She described her initial schooling as very difficult because she speaks Kurdish, and her classes were taught in Arabic. She stated that even though “it was very hard, but I was trying.” She also stated that she has forgotten all of the Arabic that she learned.
Both of Plantig’s parents attended school through middle school. She stated that her parents are very happy when she says that she likes school. “For me, I like school. I want to learn everything. I want to do something. I don’t want to just stay at home. I want to do something.”

Currently, Plantig is an ELL level 2, which means that she is not eligible to take the RDGE. She stated that the class is easy for her because the teacher is really good, and “I learn English.” She will probably take the RDGE next year, indicating that she is eligible for another year in the public school system. She hopes to earn a high school diploma because “education let you get a good job.”

Plantig had no trouble voicing her desire to become a designer. She had learned to sew with her mother in Iraq where they had a sewing machine and made clothes. She wants to continue learning to sew.

When asked what she would like to be doing in five years, she stated that she didn’t like to think about the future, because “we just don’t know what is going to happen tomorrow.” At this point in the interview, Plantig began to cry. “I want to go back to my country, Iraq” and that she misses everything about it. She said that she gets very sad when she talks about Iraq. She indicated that everyone in her family is safe right now. At this point in the interview, she said “I’m sorry, I cannot talk about Iraq” and the interview was stopped. Plantig sat for a few minutes to regain her composure before she left the room to return to class.
High School Graduation Indicator for Plantig – Yellow

Plantig has not waived ELL services, and is not enrolled in the Reading Advancement class, indicating that she has at least one more academic year before turning 21. She has not taken the RDGE. She has been learning English in the United States for one year, but states that she is making progress.

Tom

Tom’s home country is North Sudan and he has been in the United States, this time, for about four years. He lived in the United States for a while as a young child, but returned to North Sudan for nine years. He lives with his father (his mother is still in North Sudan), who has been in the United States since 1999 (he thinks). He has attended Lincoln H.S. for the entire time he has been back in the United States.

After graduation, Tom plans to follow in his father’s footsteps by attending Southeast Community College to study Criminal Justice, and then transfer to University of Nebraska-Lincoln to continue his education. He would eventually like to work for the FBI. His father has recently graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, with a major in History (he thinks). His father is currently planning to move to Australia, but Tom is planning to remain in Lincoln.

Despite having failed the RDGE three times, Tom remains positive and feels confident that he will pass the test in time to graduate. “But, that doesn’t mean that I’m gonna stop and just give up. So like, I’m gonna do what I gotta do, and I’m gonna pass it one day.” If he doesn’t pass the test, he feels he will get at least a C+ or higher to pass the equivalent reading class, Reading Advancement.
Tom has a strong work ethic, holding a job at McDonalds as well as attending school. He states that although the work, especially the school work, is challenging, it is good for him, stating “if it doesn’t challenge me, it doesn’t change me.” At McDonalds, he was recently promoted to Chefs Manager, which makes him very proud, since many of his friends told him that he would not be able to handle a job at McDonalds because he did not speak English. He wants to graduate from high school and continue with his education to keep pushing himself. He wants to make his parents proud, and also to help his take care of his mom in North Sudan.

Tom’s final comment during the interview is indicative of his outlook on life. “My story is just like average story, I just came here like an immigrant, and a lot of people have told me that like, you can’t do it. I’m 20 years right now and a lot of people say why do you even go to school? You’re not gonna graduate, and even like when I got work at McDonalds, some people say you’re not even gonna survive there for a week or two because you can’t even speak English. And I just proved them wrong.”

High School Graduation Indicator for Tom – Red

Tom has been learning English in the United States for four years. He has failed the RDGE three times, and is currently enrolled in the Reading Advancement class. Tom’s knowledge that he needs to pass the Reading Advancement class with a C+ or pass the RDGE indicate that he must meet one of these requirements in order to graduate.

Zizo

Zizo has been in the United States for two and a half years, spending the first year in Dallas, TX, which she stated she did not like because it is so big. Her home country is
Kurdistan, where she attended several schools for nine years. Zizo’s parents did not attend any school in Kurdistan, because there was no school in their village. Zizo stated that her parents feel they have “lost a lot of life” because they could not attend school. Because of this, Zizo and her parents feel that education is very important.

Zizo is currently an ELL Level 2 student, which means that she is not eligible to take the RDGE. She stated that she does well in her classes and that she is learning a lot of English because “they (her teachers) are so good.”

Earning a high school diploma is very important to Zizo, because without it, it is difficult to get a job. This is different than in Kurdistan, where, according to Zizo, there are no jobs. She stated that she has no idea what she wants to do in the future, but does not think she will ever return to Kurdistan. Zizo’s final statement in the interview was that people “should understand us, we are learning.”

High School Graduation Indicator for Zizo – Yellow

Zizo has not waived ELL services and is not enrolled in the Reading Advancement class, indicating at least on more academic year before turning 21. She has been in the United States learning English for two and a half years.

Discussion

Each of the participants in the study has a unique history and outlook on life. Their individual stories indicate poverty, war, varied education, distinct family relationships, and much more. They all have personal reasons for wanting to graduate from their respective high schools, and their future plans are as varied as one would expect from native-English speaking high school students. They are adolescents on their
journey to becoming adults. Additionally, they share the common challenge of passing a gatekeeper exam (or class equivalent) in order to graduate and receive a high school diploma. The following table summarizes the students’ status with regard to the high school graduation predictor.

**Table 3.** High school graduation predictor, current reading class, number of attempts at RDGE, result.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Reading class</th>
<th>No. of Attempts at RDGE</th>
<th>Result</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Reading Advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Reading Elements</td>
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<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Reading Advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zizo</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>ELL 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 illustrates the urgency of passing the RDGE or the Reading Advancement class. Five of the participants have a red high school graduation predictor, indicating that their time in the public school system may end without their receiving a diploma. Four of the participants have a yellow predictor, indicating there is hope that they may graduate, but they still have yet to meet the graduation requirements. Only one participant has met the RDGE requirement, placing him in the green graduation predictor category.

The following sections present a cross-case analysis of the students. Two themes emerged from the data of the interviews which are discussed in turn below: the importance of education and access to education. The topic of becoming a minority, or
“They should understand that we are learning.”: The Importance of Education

As stated in the earlier research, immigrant children indicate 93% of their parents believe that getting good grades is important or very important and 97% of the parents believe that finishing high school is important or very important. This is consistent with the data revealed in this study in which 100% of the students indicated that their parents believe that education is important or very important. The data from this study revealed two distinct reasons for the importance of education.

Of the ten students interviewed, five (50%) indicated their primary reason for an education was for a better life. An education would afford them the opportunity to earn a good salary, and to work in a job that interests them. Plantig stated that “Education is important in America. [It] lets you get a good job.” Zizo stated that even if she graduated from high school in Kurdistan, there are no jobs to be had. Khald furthered this sentiment by not only describing how he feels about his education, but also indicated it by his actions. In order to be able to afford living in the United States and get an education, Khald works forty hours each week. When he is working, he gets off work at 11 p.m., at which time he returns to his home to complete his homework. Josh and Midya also stated that they know they cannot get a good job without a diploma, and are trying very hard to complete their high school education.

The second reason stated by the immigrant students for the importance of an education is to help their families or communities. John, who wants to be a Civil
Engineer, stated that he has seen a lot of war in his country. He wants to return to Iraq in order to help “fix all of the buildings” which have been destroyed due to the war. Penny, Tom and Jason all indicated that they wanted to help their families by getting good jobs and earning money. And last, Dana wants to help the orphans of her community, giving them a place to live and taking care of them.

With reference to the cited studies by Carhill, Suárez-Orozco & Páez, and Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, all of the students indicated a high level of academic engagement. They all stated that they are working hard in school and are making every effort to learn English.

Several of the students self-identified as ELL Level 2 or 3, meaning that the school district recognizes a moderate level of English proficiency. This was observed during the interviews as well. All students understood the asked questions and could form a productive response.

The responses of this study to the level of the mother’s education do not agree with the findings of Carhill, Suárez-Orozco & Páez and Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, Todorova. The majority of the mother’s in this study had not been educated past middle school, which should indicate a lower level of academic success. This does not appear to be the case with these students.

Last, the individual age and time in the United States is affecting the academic success of these students. Their age is limiting the amount of school they can attend, and for the majority of these students, they simply have not been in the United States for a
long enough time to give them access to the necessary exposure to English to facilitate the language acquisition.

“It’s crazy back there.”: Access to Education

Access to education is relevant in this data and is the second category for discussion. In the studies by Carhill, Suárez-Orozco & Páez (2008) & Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, Todorova (2008), the environment of the school is measured by school quality factors such as poverty rates (in LPS the rate is relatively high, but due to equal funding throughout the district it is not as relevant), exposure to violence (the students in this study indicated that they feel safe in school), school size, and poor school attendance. However, these factors are irrelevant if students cannot get to school due to fear of violence or if no schools exist in the area.

Two of the students in this study stated that their parents could not attend school due to war. Jason indicated that his parents’ education was stopped by war, “The war didn’t let them go to school.” John also had a similar response the reason for his parents’ lack of schooling, “the situation over there 20 or 30 years ago.” This time frame references the Iran-Iraq war. These parents could not attend school, but want an education for their children.

Plantig stated that her family was safe, now. She misses her country, Iraq, but does not know if she will ever go back, due to the lack of safety for her family. Zizo indicated that neither of her parents attended school because there was no school in their village. Midya expressed this idea poignantly when she stated that people in Iraq are
fighting, “fighting to finish school.” In other words, freedom to be educated, or to have access to education.

Dana had stated that her parents had not attended any school, but did not state a reason, although it can be assumed that there was a lack of access. Dana’s statements furthered this by indicating a lack of safety in Iraq. She stated that she wants to help orphans in the future, or in her words, “people that doesn’t have a family.” The empathy displayed for this unique population indicates that she has had experience with the cause and effect of war and violence. What is not indicated in the transcripts, but seen by the researcher, was the look of fear and sadness in Dana’s eyes as she spoke of the orphans.

Dana, and the other students in this study, are not the only students in Lincoln Public Schools who have experienced war, violence and the life of a refugee (Note: this was not a question in the interview, however, for the Yezidi population, this is a reasonable assumption.) In response to the large number of students who have experienced this type of trauma, Lincoln Public Schools has established a counseling program to provide therapy to help them cope with their past, and learn other ways to live with the experiences in the future (Reist, 2017)

Josh was the most matter-of-fact when it came to talking about safety with regard to education. He originally indicated that he “felt safe” while attending North Star H.S. When asked if that was in contrast to the way he felt in Iraq, he stated “I mean, it wasn’t safe, I don’t know, it’s just not safe. Right now, it’s crazy back there.”

In summary, the immigrant students of this study have lived very different lives, and seen and experienced many different things. However, they all are close to aging out
of the public school system and need to pass the RDGE, traits they all have in common. Additionally, three trends emerged in this discussion: the importance of education, becoming a minority, and access to education.

The students in this study were asked to trust an unknown adult, asking them questions and recording their responses. This is a difficult and intimidating request for any student, especially for those who first language is not English. Because one student felt comfortable enough with the interview to discuss a difficult topic, it has been included in this study. Given the opportunity for more interaction with the students, similar situations would undoubtedly arise.

“We are all humans. We have to treat other people as humans.” : Becoming a Minority

Upon arrival in the United States, these students instantly became a minority, due to their race and/or religion. Lincoln, NE is a refugee resettlement city. According to the Lincoln Public Schools website, students and their families represent 115 countries and 96 different languages. As such, there are religions from around the world. There were no questions in the interview regarding religion, or if religion played a role in the immigration on the student. However, students freely offered this information during the course of the interview.

The Yezidi community in Lincoln has seen especially awful horrors, although they are very quiet with regard to expressing their feelings. None of the students in this study self-identified as Yezidi, however, the females did not wear a hajib, indicating that they are not Muslim, but are from Iraq. Additionally, both males and females described
aspects of war in their home country, Iraq. The remaining Yezidi population in Iraq is very small due to the genocidal targeting of the group by ISIS and it is likely that these students have seen or experienced violence (Dunker, 2015). Ironically, the Yezidi students from Iraq are assumed to be Muslim by misinformed members of the school and community, due to their home country and physical appearance. The racist remarks they endure are especially difficult, as their complex history of genocidal targeting by ISIS is not understood by the people making the hurtful remarks.

To the contrary, a Muslim student was not quiet regarding the racism he has endured. This was not due to the hurtful comments, as one would expect, but rather wanting to distance their religion from ISIS. John explains this best in his own words:

**John:** But I have my counselor, and other teachers, they help me through that issues, and help me to focus on my education. And study hard. But the thing is, I face a lot of difficult situation over here, and one of them that, I’m not saying like all the people, like most of the people, and I’m not gonna say 10 of them or 2 or something (laughing). Uh, the racism.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**John:** Like, if they see we are Muslims, they will, I don’t know how to explain, they will think that is dangerous and a risk (… inaudible) but we are a normal people, as other people.

**Interviewer:** Um hum.

**John:** We love all of the religions and we respect all the religions. That is what our religion tell us.

**Interviewer:** Um hum.
**John:** And these people, who called like ISIS, they’re not Muslims. I been there in Iraq and I know them like, I know the situation over there.

**Interviewer:** Sure.

**John:** They are not Muslims and actually they are not like from Middle East, like they came from, I’ll say, I’m not gonna mention the countries, but… they are not actually from Middle East.

**Interviewer:** Uh huh.

**John:** Yeah. It’s like…

**Interviewer:** So you’ve had people say bad things to you?

**John:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** I’m sorry. I hate to hear things like that.

**John:** It’s like, we are all like humans, and we have to treat other people as humans.

John continued by describing an incident at his job. He was working as a cashier at Wal Mart, when a customer looked at his nametag, and told him “you’re not supposed to be here.” John stated that he did not react to this person, because he didn’t know what to say.

John was the only student interviewed for this study who voiced an incident of racism. However, it is likely that the other students have experienced this as well.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (2016), during the time of November 9 – December 12, 2016, the time surrounding the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, there were 1,094 incidents of racism reported, although they also state that many of these incidents go un-reported. Of the reported cases, 315 were determined to be anti-immigrant and 112 were determined to be anti-Muslim. While it is not uncommon to hear incidences of
racism, it is difficult to comprehend when the comments are directed at a young student. To their credit, these students seem to handle themselves well when responding to incidents of racism.

**Final Thoughts**

The school experience of ELLs who are about to age out of Lincoln Public Schools but have yet to pass the RDGE is difficult to categorize. They receive tremendous support from the teachers and the guidance counselors, and yet they know if they are to graduate, they must pass the test which is very difficult for them. If they do not pass the RDGE, they must take the Reading Advancement class, causing them to either waive ELL services, or take a class for which they are not prepared. Their time in the public schools is limited due to their age, and they need to work within the system in order to graduate.

These students’ situation is stressful, and quite complicated, and yet they remain hopeful. They appreciate all of the work that their teachers and guidance counselors to for them. They remain positive despite the difficulties they face in passing the RDGE, as well as learning a new language and culture. And yet, they are willing to continue giving their best effort with the hope of capitalizing on the benefits high school diploma.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate the unique circumstances of immigrant students, and the special needs to be addressed. The importance of education, the becoming a minority, and the access to education have been detailed in the previous chapter. In order for these students, and for students like them in the future, to have a chance at obtaining a high school diploma, several items need to be addressed. These items are explicated in the Implications and Further Research sections which follow.

Implications

The debate surrounding high-stakes testing is on-going as it pertains to the effectiveness in producing the intended results, that of indicating whether or not mainstream students actually know the material being tested. Abedi explicates that the tests designed for mainstream students do not produce valid results for ELLs and they may not be sufficient evidence for making decisions important decisions regarding a student’s academic career (Abedi, 2010). The important decision in this study is whether or not the RDGE provides sufficient information regarding the students’ reading ability to determine whether or not they receive a high school diploma.

If Lincoln Public Schools is committed to a graduation exam in reading, the RDGE should be replaced with a reading comprehension test designed specifically for ELLs. The RDGE is designed for native-English speakers and, therefore, does not provide valid data for ELLs (Menken, 2008 & Abedi, 2010). The RDGE also contains a significant amount of cultural information unknown to the immigrants, therefore testing culture, and not reading comprehension of academic English.
If Lincoln Public Schools feels that the RDGE, or a graduation reading exam in reading for ELLs can be replaced, performance assessments described by Abedi should be considered. Rubrics could be developed, and teachers trained, to implement them throughout the district. These assessments permit ELLs to demonstrate knowledge, of content as well as the English language, in a valid manner. According to Menken (2008), as well as Abedi (2010), assessments designed for mainstream students, especially high-stakes tests, are not a valid measurement tool of ELLs’ knowledge.

Additionally, the mainstream teachers and guidance counselors need to better understand the lives of these students prior to their immigration to the United States, as well as their lives in Lincoln. Further training should include guidance from community members from the same areas as the immigrant students. This would also serve to strengthen the parent/school relations by demonstrating the importance of understanding each student’s unique circumstance.

Finally, class choices and ELL status will be influenced by the different high school graduation predictors (red, yellow, green). Further understanding of a student’s predictor status will help teachers and guidance counselors better advise the student to meet the requirements for graduation.

**Further Research**

Further research into the unique circumstances of these immigrant students needs to be conducted. This study was a small sampling of the ELL population in Lincoln Public Schools. Future research should include individual interviews with the students upon arrival at the school, which would better help the Guidance Counselors to place the
students in appropriate classes depending on their future goals. Additional interviews should be conducted to further guide the counselors of any changes in plans, provide additional academic support, and explain (or guide) the students through the application processes for their further education.

The majority of the students interviewed stated that their ELL teachers and guidance counselors have helped them immensely with their learning of English and their overall education. Further research into how these adults have helped these immigrant students needs to occur in order to train mainstream teachers on the best methods to help this unique student population. Besides interviews, collaboration with the students, such as personal journal entries, would be invaluable in learning information in the students’ own voice.

Last, future research needs to focus on these students longitudinally. The snapshot in time of these interviews permits only a glimpse into the circumstances surrounding the education of the immigrant population. Follow up interviews, journal entries, interviews with family members, interviews with community members, etc. would provide valuable insight into the educational needs of this population.

The immigrant students in this study are in a difficult situation. They are close to aging out of the public school system, but have yet to pass the gatekeeper exam, which without a passing score (or the passing of the equivalent class), they cannot graduate from high school. Similar stories can be heard throughout the United States. These students understand the importance of an education, as well as a high school diploma in the United States. We, as a country, have an obligation to all students in our public school system, regardless of their native language. The unique stories described in this study will
help us, as educators, to understand their situation and better serve students like them in the future who are driven by dreams for a better life.
REFERENCES


December 14, 2016

Cindy Linzell, Student
Jenelle Reeves, Ph.D.
Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education
UNL

RE: Request to Conduct Research

Dear Ms. Linzell and Dr. Reeves:

Your request to conduct a study entitled, “Struggling readers who are close to aging out of the public school system but have not passed the Reading Graduation Demonstration Exam (RGDE)” with students enrolled in Reading Advancement at North Star High School is approved. We would like to request that you expand your study to include the same population of students at Lincoln High School. We believe that this is important because of the extremely small class sizes at both schools and the potential impact on the validity of the results for this study as well as the possibility of contextual re-identification of confidential data. Please contact Vann Price and Mark Larson to secure their permission to proceed with the implementation of this study. Parent/guardian consent and student assent are required for this study. Please use the processes and forms submitted with your request. All research team members must have a background check on file before entering any LPS school for the purposes of conducting research.

Sincerely,

Leslie A. Eastman, Ph.D.
Director of Assessment and Evaluation Services

cc: Jadi Miller, Director of Curriculum
Vann Price, Principal at North Star High School
Mark Larson, Principal at Lincoln High School
Pat Hunter-Pirtle, Director of Secondary Education
Kay Byers, Human Resources Supervisor
Transcript for Recruiting Participants

Names of students who qualify for this study (19-21 year old, multi-lingual students who have not passed the LPS Reading Graduation Demonstration Exam (RGDE) or the Reading Advancement class) will be obtained by the researcher through North Star High School and Lincoln High School.

The researcher will attend one meeting of the Reading Advancement class at the convenience of the teacher, and with the permission of the principal.

“Hi! I’m Cindy Linzell and I am a graduate student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I am completing research that I hope you will help me with. Because you cannot be a student in the public school system if you are 21 years old, and if you don’t pass the Reading Graduation Demonstration Exam by April, some of you might not graduate. I would hate to see that happen, because you have so much knowledge, including knowing how to speak at least one other language. I want to learn more about how you arrived in this situation. This information is very important to me, and could possibly help students like you in the future.

I would like to ask you some questions in an interview that will take no more than 45 minutes. I will ask the same questions to each one of you, if you decide you would be willing to help me. The questions and answers would not affect your grade in your Reading Achievement class.

If you decide you would like to help me, I have a form that I will need you to sign. This form says that you understand that I am going to ask you questions. For some of you, it will be important for your parents to also understand this project, and if that is the case, I have a form for them as well. Both forms explain all of the details of the project.

Are there any questions?

I hope you will consider helping me with this research project! Thank you for your time!”
Informed Consent Form

Dear parent or guardian,

Your son or daughter has been invited to participate in the research study. Struggling readers who are close to aging out of the public school system but have not passed the Reading Graduation Demonstration Exam. Your child’s participation could give education professionals better insight into how teachers and school officials can better help multi-lingual students who are about to age out of the public school system before passing the Reading Graduation Demonstration Exam (RGDE). With this information, teachers, educational administrators and teacher educators can help create productive environments for teaching and learning for other multi-lingual students and their teachers. Their participation is voluntary and is greatly appreciated by the researcher. The age range for participation is 19 – 21 years old. Below is a detailed outline of the study.

Please read this informed consent letter, and if you are willing to have your son or daughter participate, sign it. You will receive a copy of the signed letter for your own records. Thank you for considering having your son or daughter participate in this study!

Title: Struggling readers who are close to aging out of the public school system but have not passed the Reading Graduation Demonstration Exam

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to understand how multi-lingual students are in a position to age out of the public school system before passing the Reading Graduation Demonstration Exam. By understanding these circumstances, the researcher can provide further information to the school district and the teachers in order to address the specific needs of these students.

Procedures: Interviews of no more than 45 minutes will be conducted at North Star High School in a private area of the Media Center after school or at a convenient time for the student. A follow up interview might be necessary, but will not last more than 15 minutes. The length of participation is one semester (3.5 months). Interviews will be recorded (audio only).

Benefits:
This study has the potential to give education professionals better insight into the specific circumstances surrounding multi-lingual students prior to aging out of the public school system. These circumstances can be addressed only if they are understood.

Initial

118 Hanzlik Hall / P.O. Box 880355 / Lincoln, NE 68588-0355 / (402) 472-2231 / FAX (402) 472-2837
**Risks and/or Discomforts:**
There are no known risks associated with this research. In the event of problems resulting from participation in the study, the participants can contact the first investigator (402)-261-4756.

**Confidentiality:**
All information provided to the researcher throughout through participation in this study will be protected. The student’s real name will not be used and the information will be stored on the researcher’s password-protected computer. The student’s identity will remain confidential throughout the study and in any publication or presentation of the study findings.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:**
You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to have your child participate in or during the study. You may contact the researcher at (402) 261-4756. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965.

**Freedom to Withdraw:**
Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln or LPS. The decision to withdraw will not affect the student’s grade in any class.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**
Your signature below indicates that you have decided to allow your son or daughter to participate in this study, and that you have read and understood the purpose, procedures, and safeguards of the study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**Signatures:**

<table>
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**Contact Information**
Cindy Linzell: elinzell@huskers.unl.edu; (402) 261-4756
Dr. Jenelle Reeves: jreeves2@unl.edu; (402) 472-2231
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______________________________  ________________________
Signature of Researcher  Date

Contact Information
Cindy Linzell: clinzell@huskers.unl.edu; (402) 261-4756
Dr. Jenelle Reeves: jreeves2@unl.edu; (402) 472-2231
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**Benefits:**
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Signature of Researcher       Date

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Signatures:

Signature of Participant ___________________________ Date ____________

Signature of Researcher ___________________________ Date ____________

Contact Information

Cindy Linzell: clinzell@huskers.unl.edu; (402) 261-4756
Dr. Jenelle Reeves: jreeves@unl.edu; (402)472-2231
Interview Questions – Student _________

Interview date __________________  Time _____________________

What country are you from?

How long have you lived in the United States?

How long have you lived in Lincoln?

How long have you been a student at North Star High School?

How many years did you attend school in your home country?

    How long did your parents attend school?

How challenging is the Reading Advancement class?

    What makes it challenging?

How challenging is the Reading Graduation Demonstration Exam?

    What makes it challenging?

In what way do you feel pressure to pass the class and/or the test?

What will you do if you do not pass the RDGE test or pass the Reading Advancement class?

What does it mean to you to earn a high school diploma?

    Why?

What are your plans after you graduate?

What would you like to be doing in 5 years?

Is there anything else you would like to share with me today?