African Immigrant Children in the United States

African Immigrant Children in the United States:

Challenges, Achievements, and Lived Experiences

Edited by

Michael T. Ndemanu,
Peter Otiato Ojiambo
James C. Kigamwa

African Immigrant Children in the United States:
Challenges, Achievements, and Lived Experiences

Edited by Michael T. Ndemanu, Peter Otiato Ojiambo and James C. Kigamwa

This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

MICHAEL T. NDEMANU,
PETER OTIATO OJIAMBO,
JAMES C. KIGAMWA

There is a dearth of educational, anthropological, and sociological scholarship on the African immigrant population in the United States compared to other immigrant groups (Sassa, 2019). In most social science research that has been conducted in the United States, African immigrants tend to be subsumed under a broad category of Black population despite the huge multiplicity of micro-cultures that abound in the general Black population. It is estimated that there are 4.6 million Black immigrant persons in the United States and half of that number comes from Africa while the other half is from the Caribbean (Tamir, 2022; Felton, 2022). About 1 in 5 Black people in the United States are either first-, 1.5-, or second-generation immigrants. Fifty eight percent of the Black immigrant population arrived in the United States after 2000. It is also estimated that about one-third of the Black population in the United States will be foreign-born by 2060 (Tamir, 2022; Felton, 2022; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). African immigrants are part of today's growing immigrant population in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center (2015) and Omar (2005), the African immigrant population, although a small share of the U. S. immigrant population (4.4 percent), has rapidly doubled since the 1970s and this number is projected to increase exponentially due to changing U.S. laws on immigration and naturalization. Although significantly small compared to other immigrant groups, they are among the fastest growing groups in the United States. These data demonstrate that the United States is rapidly becoming the major destination for many African immigrants. While there is a steady increase in studies about the Black immigrants and the Black population in the United States, there is a considerable need to separate the data so as to address the varying and distinct challenges that the diverse subgroups within the Black population face (Shaw-Taylor & Tuth, 2007) given that Black people in the United States are not a monolithic group; they come from a variety of cultural, linguistic, economic,

geographical, educational, and national backgrounds. Thus, a teacher's cultural knowledge about some Black children may not apply to other Black children from another country. Thus, this book, *African Immigrant Children in the United States: Challenges, Achievements, and Lived Experiences,* is not only necessary but timely in filling this literature and policy lacuna.

African immigrants are a diverse group from different regions of the African continent. About seventy-five percent come from 12 of the 55 African countries, namely: Nigeria, Egypt, Ghana, Ethiopia, South Africa, Kenya, Liberia, Somalia, Sudan, Morocco, Cape Verde, and Sierra Leone with a significant number also coming from Eritrea, Cameroon, and Burundi (McCabe, 2011; Ukpokodu, 2017). Many of these countries over the decades have experienced and continue to experience significant economic and sociopolitical problems that force some of their citizens to immigrate to the United States (U.S. Census Bureau and American Community Survey, 2014). African immigrants come from linguistically diverse countries that include Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone, and Hispanophone. Beyond these colonial associations, African immigrants bring their native languages as well as their cultural, socioeconomic, religious, and educational experiences to the United States. Like most other immigrants, African immigrants have come to the United States to seek better economic opportunities as well as to seek refuge from wars and persecution (Arthur, 2000; Obiakor & Afolayan, 2007). Some have come as "voluntary" immigrants for economic and educational opportunities while others have come as skilled professionals. Some have come "involuntarily" as refugees escaping civil strife. African immigrants carry different immigration statuses that include permanent residency, naturalized citizenship, non-immigrant statuses with student or visitor visas, and the undocumented residents who might have overstayed their visas or who entered the country without the visa.

Several studies have documented that although African immigrants in the United States often have higher academic qualifications relative to many other subgroups, they are still held back by anti-Black racism (Felton, 2022; Kposowa, 2002; Bashi & Zuberi, 1997). Many of these studies indicate that although 40 percent of African immigrants have at least a bachelor's degree and almost 16 percent have an advanced degree compared to 12.4 percent for the U.S.-born population (New American Economy, 2020), many of them are still underemployed or unemployed. Additionally, these studies highlight that although many African immigrants arrive in the United States with higher English proficiency than other immigrants, their incomes and homeownership rates are still lower than those of Asian immigrants (Tesfai, 2017). They are often sidelined from managerial positions, especially in corporate America. Studies also underscore that

while the African-born immigrants aged 16 and over have a higher rate of employment (69.2%) compared to the general foreign-born population (63.1%) and the general U.S. population (59.9%) (Hellman, 2020), it does not necessarily translate to higher incomes nor better health outcomes for them. Some studies observe that in less inclusive cities and workplaces, many African immigrants still face discrimination for speaking English with a foreign accent (Kigamwa & Ndemanu, 2017).

The few studies that have been conducted on African immigrant population have mostly focused on identity issues and the cultural divide between African Americans and African immigrants. Some studies have examined the Black racial and ethnic issues (Arthur, 2000; Rong & Brown, 2001). A few researchers have examined African immigrants' academic achievement, but mostly at the collegiate level (Suarez-Orozco et al, 2009). Only a few studies have explored academic achievement issues at the public school level (Njue & Retish, 2010). A few studies have focused on African refugees' acculturation, especially those from Eastern Africa (Kanu, 2008; Ndura & Ukpokodu, 2006). It is vital to note that in recent decades African immigrant families and their children are increasingly populating many U.S. communities and schools. Although they are dispersed across many U.S. cities, most reside in urban cities and their children increasingly attend innercity schools. Although there is a small but growing body of research on African immigrant children and reports show that they generally perform well on social integration indicators and are well educated with college completion rates that greatly exceed other immigrant groups and U.S. natives (Capps et al., 2012), little is known about their lived educational and schooling experiences in the U.S. PK-12 schools (Awokoya, 2013). Much of what is known often centers on the overgeneralized, isolated educational success stories of a few individual African immigrant students. Generally, the limited available research suggests that African immigrant students are invisible in American schools (Arthur, 2000; Harushimana, 2007; Ukpokodu, 2017); that they face difficulties and hardships (Obeng, 2008; Obiakor and Afoloyan, 2007; Obiakor et al., 2010; Ukpokodu, 2013) and schooling conditions that are culturally incongruent and have low expectations of them (Mukuria & Obiakor, 2004).

Similarly, little is known about African immigrant families and their experiences in relation to their children's schooling in the United States. The little that is known has focused on their sociocultural experiences including immigration issues, employment, and social integration (Arthur, 2000). Although African immigrants have been documented to be well educated, they often experience challenges and hardships in U.S. society as stated earlier. While some of these families reside in suburban communities,

most are concentrated in urban areas (Dixon, 2006; Ogbu, 2003). Thus, many African immigrant children attend urban schools that have been documented to underperform schools in the suburbs. Urban schools have also been reported to have educators who lack the cultural competence needed to effectively work with immigrant students and their families. Due to their physical characteristics, African immigrant students and their families are oftentimes indistinguishable from their native-born African American peers. Consequently, they are often lumped into the African American/Black racial category without recognizing the unique differences and needs they bring to school (Arthur, 2000). Furthermore, while some African immigrant students come from well-resourced and highly educated families, recent arrivals who are mostly refugees and asylees are from poor, working class and under-resourced families (Dodoo, 1997), with challenging living conditions that affect their learning outcomes. Regardless of their skills and educational levels, many African immigrant families often work low-paying temporary jobs. Many of these families live below the poverty line (McCabe, 2011). Although some African immigrant families may have adequate resources such as professional skills, time, money, and education to support their children's educational success, others lack resources like formal education and literacy skills to assist their children even as they value education as the key to upward social and economic mobility. Some African immigrant students who come from under-resourced families are more likely to take on jobs to supplement family income, which may negatively influence their schooling and academic achievement as they devote less time to their studies (Ukpokodu, 2017; Harushimana & Awokoya, 2011). African immigrant families, regardless of their educational and socio-economic status, place a high value on education. They have a high expectation for their children's education and invest immeasurably to ensure their success (Farah, 2015; Nderu, 2005).

Overall, researchers have confirmed the limited research that has been done on African immigrant families and children's experiences with U.S. schools (Obiakor & Afolayan, 2007; Ukpokodu, 2017). Very few studies have focused on African immigrant education especially children and their lived experiences in the American education system. The few studies that have been done in the field indicate that African immigrant children from English-speaking backgrounds are erroneously placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) and even in special education programs (Ndemanu & Jordan, 2017). The studies observe that despite all their higher academic attainment and high level of English proficiency, many African immigrant parents and children still face barriers to socio-economic growth. Their children were part of the 13.7 percent of Black

students who received one or more out-of-school suspensions in the 2013-2014 academic year compared to 6.7 percent for American Indian/Alaska Native students and 3.4 percent of White students (NCES, 2020). Like all Black children in America, children from African countries are more likely than other ethnic/racial groups to face linguicism, discrimination, colorism in school, bullying, criminalization, juvenile incarceration, and police harassment (NCES, 2020). Some studies have indicated significant academic failure among African immigrant students that predisposes them toward engagement in antisocial activities (Traore & Lukens, 2006). A few qualitative studies have shown that African immigrant students struggle to do well after their second year in school, several of them are invisible and are subjected to forms of marginalization, minoritization and discrimination (Awokoya, 2013; Obiakor & Afolayan, 2007). The small but growing qualitative studies reveal that several African immigrant students in U.S. PK-12 schools are struggling academically, falling behind, disengaged, failing, dropping out, engaging in drug activities, prostitution, getting pregnant, engaging in antisocial behaviors and criminal activities and those with non-resident status do not have access to financial aid to fund their studies and many face challenges of having to pay high college tuition as non-residents considering that their parents are part of the two million adult immigrants with college degrees that have been relegated to low-skilled (Traore & Lukens, 2006; Batalova et al, 2016). Ukpokodu (2017) observes that "regardless of what some reports say about African immigrants as the most highly educated immigrant group and as America's new model minority, in reality, many African immigrant children and their families are not well served in U.S. PK-12 schools" (p.4). Unfortunately, little is known about their individual and collective challenges, resilience, achievements, and lived experiences within American schools.

The chapters in this book offer American educators and professionals of various extractions who are working with African immigrant children the need to be versed with their culture, lived experiences, and challenges in order to be more culturally responsive in their professional approaches that can enable them to succeed in school and life. Besides educators, this book will help African immigrant parents, caregivers, social workers, and healthcare professionals to address some of the mental, behavioral, linguistic, and social-cultural challenges that African immigrant children face, but are never addressed due to acculturation gaps. The book provides a razor-focused literature and research findings on sociocultural needs and instructional solutions for the education of African immigrant children and raises awareness about the difficulties they confront in seeking to acquire quality education in their new host country. It provides parenting material

to help parents navigate parenting difficulties in the United States as well as to help their children cope with the differing cultural identity development challenges. It offers innovative solutions to teaching diversity, equity, inclusion and multicultural education.

Given the strong empirical and theoretical underpinnings of various chapters in the book, the book is a substantive scholarly contribution to the field of social sciences, and more specifically to educational anthropology, teacher education, comparative education, social and counselling psychology, international studies among other fields. The book will help educators of immigrant children to become more culturally competent and culturally responsive to pedagogy. Considering the intricacies of immigration and all the psychosocial issues that it engenders, this book advances knowledge that social workers, educators, health professionals, and policymakers will find valuable as they seek to design a protocol that meets African immigrant educational, social, cultural, and mental needs. The book also seeks to legitimize African immigrant children's lived experiences and enlighten readers on the needs and challenges of these children in the U.S. education system. It is designed to provide knowledge about African immigrants to educators at all levels of education in the U.S. to boost their cultural competencies so that they can become better teachers and counsellors of African immigrant children because research continues to demonstrate that due to inadequate preparation, many teachers in U.S. schools lack the cultural and multicultural competency needed to work with culturally, ethnically, socioeconomically and linguistically diverse student populations (Banks, 2016; Ghong et al, 2007). As earlier stated, many U.S. teachers are inadequately prepared to work with immigrants, "especially African immigrants who are often invisible within the U.S. schools" (Ukpokodu, 2017, p.10). Several scholars have called on teacher education programs to prepare teachers for multicultural competency. Teachers who are multiculturally or culturally competent will be more capable of providing a nurturing, humanizing, and supportive classroom environment and enact a culturally responsive curriculum that supports their humanity and academic achievement. Culturally-competent educators are more able to develop a synergistic, responsive relationship and collaborative partnership with families. This is vital for African immigrant children who come from communally-oriented cultures and so value relationships and collaboration. Delpit (1995) reminds us that "Teachers cannot hope to begin to understand who sits before them unless they can connect with the families and communities from which their students come" (p.179).

The book consists of eight chapters conceptualized under several themes including: belonging, resilience, academic success, and acculturation.

In the subsequent paragraphs, we provide a brief overview of each chapter discussed in the book. Chapter 1, authored by Fonkem Achankeng, focuses on the lived experiences of immigrant families with adolescent children in Northeast Wisconsin, with the purpose of understanding some of the conflicts the families encounter as adolescent members struggle with identity issues. The chapter draws on information collected and analyzed in a qualitative study that explores the conflict dynamics in first-generation African immigrant families with adolescent children. The chapter argues that the realities of immigration and the cultural diversity into which African immigrants plunge, often unknown to both parents and children, can add to the complexities of such conflicts. The study uses the methodology of biographical narratives on personal and social identity issues among African immigrant teenagers struggling between two cultures. Of particular importance in the analysis is how much individuality should be encouraged in social identity formation. The study concludes with a discussion of the implications for education, human services and social work practices of some of the conflicts experienced by the new African immigrant families.

In Chapter 2, Rosemary Eustace and Flora Poponoe utilizing a social-ecological perspective, explore the U.S. historical, cultural, linguistic and academic landscape as examples of social determinants that influence the Black immigrant family structure and functions. Specifically, the chapter presents characteristics, challenges, assets and opportunities in socializing and raising a Black immigrant child within the context of African-born parents who are not descendants of the U.S. Tran-Atlantic slave trade. The chapter concludes with implications of the study for practice, research and policy on Black immigrants' health and social welfare.

Rhonda Ortiz, through an empirical study examines the intersection of family, racial identity, religion and academic success among African immigrant students in the U.S. public schools in chapter 3. The chapter argues that although the children of African immigrants enter the U.S. educational system with a strong sense of family connectedness, identity and religious affiliation, the U.S. educational system is critically underprepared to provide appropriate culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy and curriculum for these new students (Harushimana & Awokoya, 2013). The chapter underscores that students of African heritage often feel invisible due largely to the lack of pertinent, accurate information about Africa in school curricula. It observes that the school personnel make assumptions about students based on skin color and false perceptions of abilities and students often are made to feel ashamed of their heritage and language. The chapter notes that while many educators wish they knew

more about these students, there is insufficient scholarship about them for teachers to feel culturally competent relating to their families from Africa. Teachers receive little to no training regarding the rich funds of knowledge inherent in African immigrant families and more often operate from a limited understanding.

Chapter 4 authored by James Kigamwa discusses various approaches that can be used to improve learning outcomes in U.S. K-12 schools for immigrant African families. Using the framework of collaborative engagement between schools and the new immigrant African families, the chapter examines ways in which immigrant parents can support their children by effectively executing their roles as a coach, advocate, and community representative; and how schools and teachers can assist them to be effective participants in the education of their children. The chapter takes a close look at how parents can have improved home environment and practice, advocate for their children in school, and participate in school governance as community members.

In chapter 5, Michael Ndemanu, argues that it is a truism that most African immigrants leave their countries to the United States for better economic opportunities for themselves and their children as well as for security reasons. Considering that they view education as a principal gateway to these economic opportunities, there is a high expectation within the African immigrant community in the U.S. that a child will go to college upon completing high school. Using a narrative inquiry methodology and theoretical framework (Clandinin, 2000), the chapter explores in-depth African immigrants' acculturation in the United States and North America, in general, and ways in which parenting and parental academic expectations impact their children's mental health. The chapter underscores that Sub-Saharan African immigrant children live through a myriad of challenges in the United States compounded by parental expectations, stigma on mental health, family school-dynamics, mental health, parent-child relationships, Black identity among others. The chapter proposes various approaches that can be used to address these challenges.

Rosemary Eustace and Deogratias Eustace, using a socio-ecological approach, shed light on the challenges of raising African-immigrant children in the U.S. in chapter 6. Specifically, the chapter examines the father-son family subsystem to illustrate the acculturative risks and protective factors encountered within the larger socio-ecological environment. The chapter observes that the subject of fatherhood among African immigrant families in the U.S. has limited literature. Implications for improving immigrant child health and well-being across various levels of influences are discussed in detail within the chapter.

Chapter 7 contributed by Sandra, Schmidt and Van Anh Tran, explores how African immigrant children from West Africa in the U.S. are navigating the politics of non-belonging and the civic discontent that emanate from the process. The chapter notes that with migration comes a repositioning of the self in the world. The study findings in the chapter opens space for African immigrant youth to tell their stories of finding their way in the U.S. schooling system and the larger society. The chapter engages with framings of belonging and becoming to ask how the youth identities and belonging are navigated in their everyday interactions within and outside school. The research arena within the chapter is an after-school Africa Club that holds space for collective knowledge construction. The study findings within the chapter tell the stories of being-made and self-making as students share memories through artefacts, refuse associations with stereotypes as they present misconception posters and wrestle with colorism after viewing a play. Overall, the chapter emphasizes the importance of supporting the social dynamics of belonging as students attach and detach spaces and identifications.

In chapter 8, Peter Ojiambo discusses the history of the teaching of African languages in the U.S and their role in helping African immigrant children navigate the American education system. The chapter observes that the teaching of African languages in the U.S. has a long history. Initially begun in the 1940s as part of the U.S. higher education internalization efforts to prepare American students for their broader engagement in all spheres of international arena- social, political, and economic and to enhance further America's global power and to protect its global interests, the field has grown exponentially over the decades. The chapter observes that since its early beginnings, the teaching of African languages was a move that thrilled families and students of African descent that included: African American students, African-born students, African- foreign-born students and students from the larger African diaspora that reside in the U.S. Their major impetus then, and has remained the same to date, was the need to know the various facets of their cultural heritage and identity. African languages were seen as a gateway to this in a myriad of ways. The chapter discusses in detail the history of the teaching of African languages in the U.S. from the early beginnings to the present, its success, challenges, prospects and the author's two decades lived teaching and leadership experience as an African languages' educator.

African immigrant children in the United States: Challenges, Resilience, Achievements, and Lived Experiences book is not only relevant but timely. As the adage, it takes a village to raise a child contends, this book serves as a call to action for experts in the fields of education,

counselling and psychology, social work, and medical programs to work in synergy with African immigrant parents to facilitate the integration of their children in the U.S. education system. The book provides empirical findings, literature-based essays, and lived experiences of authors for U. S. educators, policymakers, and social workers to support African immigrant children as they navigate the American educational landscape as first- and second-generation immigrant children. It is our hope that the various issues examined in this book will be explored more and incorporated in educational research, theory, reform, policy and practice in U.S. educational system to enrich the teaching and learning process and to produce better learning outcomes of African immigrant children. Numerous educators, scholars, students, administrators and community leaders engaged in the field of education both in the U.S. and beyond will find the book a great resource for their work.

References

Arthur, J. (2000). *Invisible sojourners: African immigrant diaspora in the United States*. Westport, Connecticut: Prager.

Awokoya, J.T. (2013). They can't teach what they don't know: Insights from teacher professional development workshops on Africa. In I. Harushimana, C. Ikpe & S. Mthethwa-Sommers, (Eds.), *Reprocessing race, language and ability: African born educators and students in transnational America* (pp.89-105). New York: Peter Lang.

Banks, J.A. (2016). *Cultural diversity and education: Foundations, curriculum and teaching*. New York: Routledge.

Bashi, V., & Zuberi, T. (1997). A theory of immigration and racial stratification. *Journal of Black Studies*, 27(5), 668+. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A19998106/PPDS?u=s9004578&sid=bookmarkPPDS&xid=318a3147

Batalova, J. Fix, M. Bachmeier, J. D. (2016). Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States, Migration Policy, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/untapped-talent-costs-brain-waste-among-highlyskilled-immigrants unitedstates#:~:text=This%20skill%20underutilization%E2%80%94often%20referred,than%20%2439%20billion%20in%20wages.

Capps, R., McCabe, K., & Fix, M. (2012). *Diverse streams: African migration to the United States*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. Available Online.

Clandinin, D.J., & Connelly, F.M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.

Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children*. New York: The New Press.

Dixon, D. (2006, January 26). The characteristics of the African born in the United States. United States in Focus. *Migration Information Source*: Retrieved from
http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=366.

Dodoo, F. Nii-Amoo. (1997). Assimilation differences among Africans in America. *Social Forces*, 76(2):527-546).

Farah, A.L. (2015). *Somali parental involvement in education: Case studies of two urban public schools in the United States*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. (3688037).

Ghong, M., Saah, Larke, P.J., & Webb-Johnson, G. (2007). Teach my child, too: African immigrant parents and multicultural educators sharing culturally responsive teaching tips. *Journal of Praxis in Multicultural Education*, 2(1), 61-69.

Felton, E. (Jan 20, 2022). One in 10 Black people living in the U.S. are immigrants, new study shows. The Washington Post.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/01/20/blackamerican-immigrants/

Harushimana, I. (2007). Educational needs of linguistically and culturally underrepresented immigrant youths: The case of African-born immigrant students in United States urban schools. *Journal of Border Educational Research*, 61 (21): 69-81.

Harushimana, I., and Awokoya, J. (2011). African-born immigrants in U.S. schools. *Journal of Praxis in Multicultural Education*, 6(1), 34-48**.**

Hellman, R. (June 23, 2020). Study shows African immigrants in US do well, despite differences among them. KU News.
https://news.ku.edu/2020/06/18/study-shows-african-immigrants-dowell-despite-differences-among-them

Kanu, Y. (2008). Educational needs and barriers of African refugees in Manitoba. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 31 (4), 915-940.

Kigamwa, J., & Ndemanu, M. (2017). Translingual practice among African immigrants in the United States: Embracing the mosaicness of the English language. *Special issue of Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 38(5), 468-479. Routledge.

Kposowa, A. J. (2002). Human capital and the performance of African immigrants in the U.S. labor market. *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 26(3), 175+.
https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A96195843/PPDS?u=s9004578&sid=bookmarkPPDS&xid=6db934f9

McCabe, K. (2011). African Immigrants in the United States. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. Retrieved from
http://www.migrationinformation.org.

Mukuria, G., & Obiakor, F.E. (2004). Special education issues and Africa diaspora. *Journal of International Special Needs Education*, 7, 12-17.

NCES (2020). Indicator 15: Retention, Suspension, and Expulsion https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_rda.asp

Ndemanu, M. T. & Jordan, S. (2017). Culturally responsive pedagogy for African immigrant children in the U.S. P-12 schools. *Journal of Black Studies*, 49(1), 71-84.

New American Economy (March 19, 2020). Power of the Purse: The Contributions of Black Immigrants in the United States. https://research. newamericaneconomy.org/report/blackimmigrants-2020/

Nderu, E.N. (2005). Parental involvement in education: A qualitative study of Somali immigrants in the Twin Cities area. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. (3160164).

Ndura, E., & Ukpokodu, O.N. (2006). Obstacles to equal opportunity for African refugees in the United States. In M. C. Brown (Eds.). *Still not equal: Expanding educational opportunity in society* (pp.393-408). New York: Peter Lang.

Njue, J. & Retish, P. (2010). Transitioning: Academic and social performance of African immigrant students in an American high school. *Urban Education*, (45): 347-370.

Obeng, C.S. (2008). African immigrants' families and the American educational system. In T. Falola & N. Afolabi (Eds.), *African minorities in the new world* (pp.247-260). Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Obiakor, F.E., Grant, P. & Obi, S. (2010). *Voices of foreign-born African American teacher educators in the United States*. New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

Obiakor, F.E., & Afoloyan, M. (2007). African immigrant families in the United States: Surviving the sociocultural tide. *The Family Journal 15: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 15 (3): 265-270.

Ogbu, J. (2003). *Black American students in an affluent suburb: A study of academic disengagement*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Omar, S. (2005). *Diversity and transformation. African Americans and African immigration to the U.S.* Retrieved from www.migrationinformation, org/usfocus.

Pew Research Center. (2015). African immigrant population in U.S. steadily climbs. Retrieved from http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/02/African-immigrant-population-in-u-s-steadily-climbs/.

Pew Research (2015). A Rising Share of the U.S. Black Population is Foreign Born.

https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/04/09/a-rising-share-of-the-u-s-black-population-isforeign-born/.

Rong, X.L., and Brown, F. (2001). The effects of immigrant generation and ethnicity on educational attainment among young African and Caribbean Blacks in the United States. *Harvard Educational Review*, 71 (3):536-565.

Sassa, S. K. (2019). Discrimination, coping, and social exclusion among African immigrants in the United States: A moderation analysis. *Social Work*, 64(3), 198-206.

Shaw-Taylor, Y. & Tuth, S. (Eds.). (2007). *The Other African Americans: Contemporary African and Caribbean Families in the United States*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers inc.

Suarez-Orozco, C., & Suarez-Orozco, M.M. (Eds.). (2001). *Children of immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tamir, C. (Jan 27, 2022). Key findings about Black immigrants in the U.S. Pew Research Center.
https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/01/27/key-findings-about-black-immigrants-in-theu-s/

Tesfai, R. (2017). Racialized Labour Market Incorporation? African Immigrants and the Role of Education-Occupation Mismatch in Earnings. Int Migr, 55: 203-220. https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12352

Traore, R., & Lukens, R.J. (2006). *This isn't the America I thought I'd find: African students in the urban U.S. high school*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Ukpokodu, O.N. (2017). Perspectives of African Immigrant parents on U.S. PK-12 school System. In U. Omiunota, N. & O. Peter, O. (Eds.), *Erasing invisibility, inequity and social justice of Africans in the diaspora and the continent* (pp.2-23). Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Ukpokodu, O.N. (2013). Fostering African immigrant students' social and civic integration: Unpacking their ethnic distinctiveness. In E. Brown & A. Krasteva (Eds.), *International advances in education: Global initiatives for equity and social justice* (pp.215-236). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2013). 2013 American Community Survey. American Factfinder. Available from https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/guidance/comparing-acs-data/2013.html.

U.S. Census Bureau & American Community Survey (2014). American Community Survey.
http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_ 14_1YR_S0504&prodType=table

CHAPTER 1

FIRST GENERATION IMMIGRANT TEENAGERS, INTRA-FAMILY CONFLICTS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION, HUMAN SERVICES AND SOCIAL WORK

FONKEM ACHANKENG
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-OSHKOSH

Abstract

This chapter focuses on the lived experiences of immigrant families with adolescent children in Northeast Wisconsin with the purpose of understanding some of the conflicts families encounter as adolescent members struggle with identity issues. This chapter draws on information collected and analyzed in a qualitative study that explored the conflict dynamics in first- generation immigrant families with adolescent children. It is argued that the realities of immigration and the cultural diversity into which immigrants plunge, often unknown to both parents and children, can add to the complexities of such conflicts. This study uses biographical narratives to investigate personal and social identity issues among immigrant teenagers struggling between two cultures. The extent to which individuality should be encouraged in the formation of social identity is of particular importance in this analysis. The study concludes by discussing the implications for education, human services, and social work practices related to the conflicts experienced by new immigrant families.

Keywords: Cross-cultural conflict, immigrant families, adolescence, identity conflicts, acculturation, duality of immigrant lives, social identity formation, cross-cultural lives, transcultural identities.

Introduction

The case of an Afghan immigrant father who killed his three teenage daughters because of a conflict over his girls' dress patterns (Blatchford, 2012) is one example of the many conflicts evident in first-generation immigrant families with adolescent children. This unfortunate case calls forth renewed emphasis for the fields of human services, education, social work, and others to understand cross-cultural conflicts in immigrant households. Although many scholars (Davis, 2012; Gallarin & Alonso, 2012; Cavendish, 2012; Appel, Holtz, Stiglbauer & Batinic, 2012; Ozdimir, Vazsonyi, & Cok, 2012) have focused on who adolescents are, how they relate to peers, and parental influences, few studies have been devoted to understanding the conflicts experienced in first-generation immigrant households with adolescent children. This chapter contributes to understanding the duality of first-generation adolescent immigrant lives and some behaviors that cause conflicts in immigrant households from a cross-cultural perspective. The realities of immigration and the cultural diversity into which immigrants plunge, often unknown to both parents and their adolescent children, can add to the complexities of such adolescent and household conflicts, with implications for human services, education, and social work practices.

Academic Reasons for Studying Immigrant Adolescent Children

The social reality of many adolescent immigrant children in the United States is that they and their families arrive in the country when their American peers are in conflict with their parents as the adolescents struggle to establish personal identities. Understanding the biological, sociological, and psychological realities within and around immigrant teenagers and the challenges of the two cultural universes (home country universe and host country universe) in which immigrant adolescents find themselves is significant for increasingly diverse host communities (Bronfenbrenner, 1970; Kohlberg & Lickona, 1976; Berk, 2000). As immigrants remain in contact with their homelands following migration (Vertovec, 2002), such persistent attachment results in a form of dual existence given that immigrants experience "multi-locational identities that bridge geographical space" (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002, p. 6).

Methods

A qualitative approach using an interview format was employed to identify the conflicts encountered by first-generation immigrant families and their adolescent children. The data collection methodology was biographical narrative research. In this qualitative approach, participants told their stories of themselves and their families without interruption. This life-story interviewing method was first used by a German sociologist, Fritz Schutze (1983, 1984). As researchers in different disciplines and geographical areas have shown (Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, Rivka, and Zilber, Tamar, 1998; Lomsky-Feder, 2004; Rosenthal, 1993; Wengraf, 2001), the life-story method offers a profound understanding of the meanings that individuals give to their lives and their experiences. As a way of conducting an in-depth study of individuals, the life-story interview is important for its interdisciplinary applications in understanding the lives of individuals in detail and how each individual plays various roles in society (Cohler, 1993, Gergen & Gergen, 1993; Atkinson, 1998). Van Manen (2002) also considered the life-story method a type of phenomenological approach used to understand the significance people give to their life experiences.

According to Chaitin (2004), this methodology relies on two major assumptions. First, while the life story of each subject is unique, the stories are also embedded in particular social and cultural contexts. By studying individuals, the experts contend, we not only gain an understanding of the individual's experiences but also insights into the particular social structures and dynamics, cultural values, mores, and norms in which the individuals live (Rosenthal, 1993, 1998).Second, life stories can be systematically interpreted and analyzed, considering that people choose what to say and how to say it. Creswell (1998), subscribing to this viewpoint, maintained that human experiences are expressed consciously and tangibly through the views of those who lived the experiences.

In keeping with the tradition of life-story interviewing, an open-ended method of eliciting participants' information was used. After explaining the overall purpose of the study and obtaining the consent of the participants at the beginning of the interview, the researcher asked the interviewees, also known as autobiographers, to "please tell me your life story, whatever you think is relevant." Chaitin (2004) advises that in the use of this data collection method, interviewees are not led by the interviewer in any way but are allowed to freely choose how and what to talk about.

Participants

A random selection of 15 students was conducted from a list of first-generation immigrant students purposefully selected from within area schools. The adolescents were first-generation immigrants or refugees living with their parents in Northeast Wisconsin. Personal invitations were mailed to the participants requesting their participation. Because of confidentiality issues, separate meetings were scheduled for individual participants. Those who volunteered to participate received two consent forms, one to sign and one for their parents. Participants aged 18 and over had the option of receiving or declining parental consent forms. The first 15 first-generation immigrant adolescents to volunteer were included in the study. Although the plan was to use 12 adolescents, the aim was to start with 15 so that it would still be possible to meet the set plan in case of a participant's withdrawal. Although purposefully random, the participants came from varied backgrounds, as indicated in Table 1, representing the diversity of the population typically living in the area. Their ages ranged from 14 to 18, and six of them dropped out because of parental reasons.

In total, nine in-depth life story interviews (five boys and four girls) were conducted between April 2018 and May 2020 in two cities in Northeast Wisconsin. In all cases, respondents were asked to participate in a study examining attitudes toward dressing and conflict among adolescent immigrant children and parents. The reason for purposefully selecting the cases in the first place was to highlight examples of "resentful parent culture and influence" and "pressures of host country culture" mediated through school and peer contexts regarding dress patterns. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used: *Songo, Mabu, Maria, Jose, Chai, Vang, Mbongtalo, Merengue, and Emil.* Ethnically, of the nine participants, three were Africans, two were Hispanic, two were Hmong, one was European, and one was Chinese. Table 1 lists the participants' names, gender, age, ethnicity, immigrant generation rank, and living arrangements. One of the assumptions guiding the selection of the participants was that adolescents often clashed with their parents and that being immigrant made it worse or more intense because of the complexity of two cultures.

Data analysis

When moving from data collection to data analysis, the researcher immersed himself with the data as he played the voice recording and transcribed every word uttered by each participant. Each word was considered the consciousness of the participants and recorded in the exact

way they were uttered. After transcription was completed, the researcher conducted analyses to identify common themes in each interview. The written transcripts were reviewed for similar experiences and ideas by color coding, sifting, and resifting until recurrent themes from the nine narratives were identified. Through this back-and-forth process of dialoging between the data and my experiences as the researcher, patterns emerged that developed into themes related to big cities and schools, new experiences, and constant home problems.

Table 1
Name, Gender, Age, Ethnicity, Immigrant Generation Rank, and Living Arrangement of Participants

Name	Gender	Age at time of research	Ethnicity	Immigrant generation	Living with
Mabu	Male	17	African	1	Biological Parents
Songo	Male	14	African	1	Biological Parents
Maria	Female	18	Hispanic	1	Biological Parents
Jose	Male	15	Hispanic	1	Biological Parents
Chai	Female	17	Hmong	1	Biological Parents
Vang	Female	17	Hmong	1	Biological Parents
Mbongtalo	Male	16	African	1	Biological Parents
Merengue	Female	16	Chinese	1	Biological Parents
Emil	Male	18	Bulgarian	1	Biological Parents

The analysis assessed how first-generation adolescent children viewed cultural values such as dressing and hairstyles, how these patterns affected the formation of their individual social identity, and how these patterns influenced conflicts from parent opposition. In interpreting each of the nine cases, every effort was made to retain a sense of the entirety of the narratives, and the focus was on the themes that emerged from the stories.

Each case was then analyzed and further explored for key themes in the interpretation of recurrent conflicts in immigrant homes and lives as social identities are formed.

To maintain the reliability and validity of the data, the interviews were tape-recorded to enhance accuracy. Listening to the stories free of any bias and personally transcribing the data was helpful for the added credibility and trustworthiness of the data as the understanding appeared holistic given that the researcher could re-image the body language, tone, mood, and voice of the participants as he transcribed each narrative. Although a complete presumption-less description of the data may not be possible, and although it is difficult to completely bracket human biases, bracketing, combined with a careful substantiation of the data analysis procedures, provide the audience with the possibility of understanding the process of data interpretation and the conclusions arrived at in the study.

Results

Common themes among the immigrant adolescent students included impressions of (a) big cities and big schools with many computers in seven of the nine stories, (b) new experiences in school and family relationships in all nine narratives, (c) constant problems and disagreements with parents over issues such as dress and hairstyles emerged in all stories. Four out of the nine participants interviewed also raised disagreements with parents over cases such as "hanging out," "sleeping in," "church issues," and the "kinds of friends" they had. In analyzing these different themes, the emphasis remained on family conflicts over how the parents' values are impacted by the cultures of both the home and host countries, specifically related to dress patterns and hairstyles.

Big Cities and Big Schools with Many Computers

The stories narrated by the immigrant adolescents revealed that the adolescent immigrants admired big cities and their new schools, which were very well equipped with computers, although they found it challenging to adapt to many things in the cities and schools. In the trans-cultural homes and lives of immigrant families, immigrant adolescents with backgrounds in different types of schools had trouble adapting to the new technology and new school culture. In addition to the new technology, part of the new educational experience involved a lot of homework and a new learning culture, with some of the schoolwork being done on computers at home. In the stories of the immigrant adolescents, their frustration was further

compounded by the fact that they had no computers and internet at home, and many of the parents did not understand or speak English. As Maria's story revealed, her "parents had been thrown out by [her] uncle and his wife who had initially hosted [them], and [her] family of four went to live in a small space in a Good Samaritan's basement." Her father did not understand English, and they were barely surviving, let alone owning a computer. The stories analyzed revealed that the immigrant adolescents and their parents found themselves at the intersection of two worlds and two school cultures: the culture of the parents and the new culture in which the children were being socialized. The realities of big cities and schools in the new host society presented immigrant adolescents with a major source of intra-personal conflict, as illustrated in many of the narratives.

New Experiences from School and Family Relationships

Through the interaction with the immigrant adolescents studied, it was evident that they had new experiences at school that greatly influenced their thinking about relationships with parents and how the adolescents behaved toward them. All nine immigrant adolescents came from cultures where young people did not talk back to their parents because that was considered inappropriate behavior. From the new schools, the adolescents not only picked up the habit of talking back to their parents, but they also learned how they could do so without being punished. Understanding that children could run freely in the new culture appeared to be exciting for Vang. She noted:

> When I was back home in Laos, I could never talk back to my parents. They would just kill me … here, they cannot do it because that would be child abuse. One boy in my school said the police arrested his father for spanking him.

The school culture was a major influence on the adolescents, and their peers became the dominant source of information rather than their parents. Disrespect was reinforced at home by television programs in which adolescents talked back freely to their parents. Chai recounted how her "parents hated many programs [she] watches at home." She was not alone. The stories of other immigrant adolescents revealed that the programs they watched at home were damaging to their family dynamics. Merengue mentioned "the look [she] saw on her mother's face each time she met [her] watching one program [she] loved." The stories revealed that first-generation immigrant parents and their children live in two different worlds despite the pressures of the host country.

Problems between Immigrant Parents and Adolescent Children

Many of the participants' stories revealed conflict with their parents over dress patterns, language use, home responsibilities, sleeping in on weekends, curfews, clashes over listening expectations, and hairstyles. The parents of immigrant adolescents were not happy with the dress patterns of their children, and the children considered such dress patterns as what they wanted. Mabu seemed to admire his friends' baggy pants most of the time in high school. He wanted to wear similar pants, but his parents were vehemently opposed to the idea based on the impressions that the culture of origin had for such clothing. His parents told him that "people with baggy pants were perceived as thieves and irresponsible youngsters." He said, "My parents were very opposed to me wearing pants that were falling, and they told me so. I feel they are preaching to me, and I hate them preaching to me all the time."

Language use was also a source of conflict in the narratives of the adolescent immigrants. They said their parents were furious with them when they referred to them as "You guys." Although they remembered hearing their friends use such language with their parents, they were surprised that their own parents were not friendly each time they referred to them as "you guys." Similarly, conflicts were related to house chores. The six participants narrated the conflicts they always had at home with their parents, who expected them to help them at home as children usually did in their home country. They said their American friends simply got up in the morning and went to school, and each time they tried doing what their friends did, their parents were furious.

Closely related to home responsibilities was the fact that the participants in the study liked sleeping in on Saturdays as their American friends did, but their parents were always unhappy with them. Mbongtalo narrated how his father came close to slapping him one morning. There had been a snowstorm in the city the previous evening, and his father was up in the morning shoveling the snow alone. It was unheard off in their home country for young people to sleep in while their parents were working in the morning. The narratives also revealed that immigrant parents were unhappy with their adolescent children's staying away from home late into the night.

Another source of conflict with parents was eye contact. Whereas the immigrant adolescents were learning at school that making eye contact in conversations was a mark of good listening skills, whenever they tried the habit with their parents, it landed them in trouble. Many participants soon learned that looking at their parents' eyes was not only considered by their parents as a sign of disrespect but also rude.

Seven of the nine stories analyzed in this study revealed parents' conflict over hairstyles. Mabu noted:

> I knew the way my parents would prefer I get my haircut, which was of course the way I had always been getting it cut-everything low... It was the look I had seen sported by 'all the other cool guys' on TV and knew, really really knew, deep down in my gut, that it was the look for me… I came home and presented myself to my parents… My mom was not impressed, to say the least. She didn't find my haircut cool, and conveyed to me that she felt more disgusted than anything…

Mbongtalo, another participant, described the disagreement he had with his parents over his dread locks hairstyle by noting that:

> My dread locks virtually alienated me from my parents and caused great strain between me and my parents. My mother was particularly affected, as she never knew how we could go to church together. The situation was worse because we lived in a predominantly white town, where people had different views about Black people. My mom found it difficult for people who knew us would consider me her child.

Discussion

From the stories collected and analyzed, we can understand that the adolescents were resentful of the values their parents were imposing on them, especially on issues such as dress patterns, language use, curfews, sleeping in, attitudes, and hairstyles perceived differently from different cultural perspectives. Songo's story is indicative of a conflict atmosphere within his immigrant family. He observed that, "*I* remember this ugly incident with my father who felt really angry with me when I refused to accept my new African clothes …". This finding corresponds to the literature, which shows that parents and children conflict the most during adolescence in terms of behavior expectations and cultural influences. Before this stage, children are still too young to want to impose on their parents, and after adolescence, most people become young adults concerned mainly with love relationships. Adolescence, Erikson (1968) asserted, is a time in life when individuals want to know who they are, how they relate to peers, and how peers view them. This happens when parents struggle to maintain control, whereas adolescents vehemently resist it and can be worse for immigrants struggling with two cultures. These culturally relative aspects of behavior often generate conflict at home, especially among first-generation immigrant families experiencing different forms of economic and psychological stress (Ben-Sira, 1997; Choi, 1997; Dustin, 2010).