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Lydia Kananu Kiramba

*University of Nebraska–Lincoln*, [lkiramba2@unl.edu](mailto:lkiramba2@unl.edu)

Adaurennaya C. Onyewuenyi

*The College of New Jersey*, [onyewuea@tcnj.edu](mailto:onyewuea@tcnj.edu)

Alex Kumi-Yeboah

*University at Albany, State University of New York*, [akumi-yeboah@albany.edu](mailto:akumi-yeboah@albany.edu)

Anthony Mawuli Sallar

*Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration*, [asallar@gimpa.edu.gh](mailto:asallar@gimpa.edu.gh)

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# Navigating multiple worlds of Ghanaian-born immigrant adolescent girls in US urban schools

Lydia Kananu Kiramba,<sup>1\*</sup> Adaurennaya C. Onyewuenyi,<sup>2</sup>  
Alex Kumi-Yeboah,<sup>3</sup> and Anthony Mawuli Sallar<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education, College of  
Education and Human Sciences, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 118  
Henzlik Hall, P.O. Box 880355, Lincoln, NE 68588-0355, United States

<sup>2</sup> Department of Psychology, The College of New Jersey, 2000 Pennington Rd,  
Ewing Township, NJ 08618, United States

<sup>3</sup> School of Education, Department of Educational Theory and Practice, ED  
114, University at Albany – State University of New York-Albany, New York,  
1400 Washington Avenue, Albany NY 12222, United States

<sup>4</sup> Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA), School  
of Business, Ghana

\* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: lkiramba2@unl.edu (L.K. Kiramba), onyewuea@tcnj.edu (A.C.  
Onyewuenyi), akumi-yeboah@albany.edu (A. Kumi-Yeboah), asallar@gimpa.edu.gh  
(A.M. Sallar).

## Abstract

African immigrant populations are among the fastest growing immigrant populations in the United States, yet they are understudied and are invisible immigrant group in the educational literature, particularly, in the context of educational discourses in the United States urban schools. Drawing on Phelan et al.'s multiple worlds model, we analyzed individual and focus group interviews of forty students, thirty-six parents, and twelve teachers from two schools. Findings showed that Ghanaian-born immigrant students undergo several complex transitional paradigms combining two worlds (school and home) of Ghanaian culture, past educational

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experiences, family values, and adapting to new school environments to achieve success in American educational systems. In addition, they faced racial and ethnic discrimination and stereotypes from peers, which negatively impacted their academic progress and social adjustments in school. The authors recommend that teachers should establish new ways of understanding the multiple worlds of African-born adolescent immigrant girls by accounting for their culturally diverse ways of navigating their worlds of school, peers, and families to achieve academic success in US schools. **Keywords:** African immigrant, Adolescent girls, Multiple worlds, Multilingualism, Ghana

## Introduction

The United States has witnessed a rapid growth of immigrants from all corners of the world, which has further increased diversity within the United States by introducing people of a broad range of different socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2009; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Accordingly, Holdaway and Alba (2009) have emphasized the need to attend to these differences and thus the different types of urban, suburban, and rural student immigrants to the US.

To date, estimates place immigrant children (1.5 generation) and children of immigrants (second generation) at 25 % of all children in the United States, and increasing to one-third of the 100-million child population by 2050 (Tienda & Haskins, 2011; US Census, 2014). Among these, African immigrants represent one of the fastest growing groups. From 1980 and 2009, for example, the African-born immigrant population doubled, increasing from 881,300 to 1,606,914 (US Census, 2014).

Nevertheless, African-born immigrant students are an understudied and largely invisible immigrant population in US educational research (Allen, Jackson, & Knight, 2012), especially in situations where educators possess cultural and linguistic backgrounds different from their students (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Ukpokodu, 2013). Understandably, whereas educational scholarship on US immigrant youth has placed a major focus on Latina/o (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001) or Caribbean Black populations (Rong & Brown, 2002; Thomas, Caldwell, Faison, & Jackson, 2009; Waters, 1999), the continued obscurity of African immigrants' youth educational experiences has resulted in a tendency in teachers, administrators, and policymakers to racially classify African immigrant students

as African-American—a move that inaccurately conflates the highly diverse and varied ethnic, educational, social, psychological, and cultural experiences of African-born immigrant with Black American youth (Ukpokodu, 2013; Watson & Knight-Manuel, 2017). This results, for example, in school achievement data where African-born immigrants are subsumed within a “Black/African-American” category (De Walt, 2011). Moreover, as Avoseh (2010, p. 34) notes, “The enormous diversity of Africa makes it difficult to define anything in a universal ‘African’ sense,” the notion of “African” itself may unduly conflate highly disparate groups. In the present study, our Ghanaian-born immigrant youth represent a distinct subgroup of African immigrants generally (Ukpokodu, 2013).

More narrowly, for this study, the sociocultural and ethnolinguistic transformative changes that Ghanaian-born adolescent immigrant girls experience against the cultural background of their two worlds of family and school can have larger educational implications for their academic outcomes. For instance, whereas prior research using the Multiple Worlds Model links the academic achievements of Asian and Hispanic immigrant students in US schools (Chhuon, Hudley, Brenner, & Macias, 2010; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008), there is a dearth of research connecting this to African immigrant children generally or to Ghanaian-born immigrant adolescent girls specifically. And yet, how this group navigates academic achievement through the experiences of the multiple worlds of families, schools, teachers, and peers sheds light on these themes. In particular, the knowledge gap about the cultural and educational experiences that arise from transitioning from a predominantly Black, multilingual country and educational context to a predominantly White, monolingual-educational one (Clark, 2008; Watson & Knight-Manuel, 2017).

Several research studies have examined various actors and support systems in the integration of immigrant students (Kiramba & Oloo, 2019; Kumi-Yeboah, Brobbey, & Smith, 2020; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). These include families, supportive teachers especially English language learner (ELL) teachers, supportive school structures and ethnic communities. Ogbu and Simons (1998) found that peer relationships influence a student’s ability to establish norms within educational experiences—specifically, that peer relationships typically support immigrant student academic achievement by guiding and helping one another to complete group project

works, homework assignments, and sharing of information. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) similarly found that good relationships between peers and school settings can influence successful adaptation to new school and home settings post-immigration; providing social support for immigrants in school generally is, therefore, a key factor in such successes. Also key, García Coll and Marks (2012) also found that immigrant parents consider education and academic success to be the best pathway for upward mobility (Roubeni, De Haene, Keatley, Shah, & Rasmussen, 2015). Affecting this pathway, however, involves complex transitional changes and a continual navigation of interrelationships with other people and family members both inside and outside of schools.

Less studied, the role of gender for immigrant youth is nevertheless a critical factor that intersects with culture and shapes students' socialization processes, educational experiences, and academic achievement (Feliciano & Rumbaut, 2005; Qin, 2006). In particular, gender influences not only how immigrant adolescent girls adapt to new school and home environments but also how those environments position them. Prieur (2002, p. 53), for instance, highlights how gender affects identity formation, "both in a process of labeling from the outside and in the construction of a subjective identity."

The present qualitative study addresses gaps of knowledge regarding how Ghanaian-born immigrant adolescent girls navigate their multiple worlds of school, peers, and family to strive for academic success. Specifically, the study investigated: (1) the underlying experiences of Ghanaian-born immigrant adolescent girls as they straddled, navigated, and negotiated multiple worlds in their interactions with school, peers, and family and (2) how these girls describe their navigational strategies with respect to academic success. We also explored teachers' and parents' perceptions and understandings of the challenges influencing how Ghanaian-born immigrant adolescent girls navigate their multiple worlds of school and home.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study used the Multiple Worlds Model (MWM) developed by Phelan et al. (1998) in order to explore the several life-contexts of Ghanaian-born immigrant adolescent girls in the United States. Per

Phelan et al. (1998), a student's multiple worlds constitute the "cultural knowledge found within the boundaries of students' school contexts, teachers, peers, and families, where each world consists of the traditional values, actions, expectations, and emotional responses familiar to insiders" (p. 53). Critically, they also note how minoritized students' *worlds* are separated by social, cultural, socioeconomic, psychosocial, ethno-linguistical, and gender-based features. As such, students must find ways to maneuver as seamlessly as possible between their varied school, peer, and family worlds—including the values, expectations, and perceptions of those worlds—in order to achieve academic success (Phelan et al., 1998; Rong & Brown, 2002; Watson & Knight-Manuel, 2017).

Phelan et al. (1998) describe six interactive patterns of student movement across multiple environmental contexts: Type I (Congruent Worlds/Smooth Transitions), Type II (Different Worlds/Border Crossings Managed), Type III (Different Worlds/Border Crossings Difficult), Type IV (Different Worlds/Border Crossings Resisted), Type V (Different Worlds/Border Crossings Difficult), and Type VI (Different Worlds/Smooth Transitions). These students who attempted such identities risked criticism from those in the disparate worlds who expected adherence to the conventions of each. Type III (Different Worlds/Border Crossings Difficult), IV, and V students define their family, peer, and school worlds as distinct. They occupy different worlds and found crossing borders difficult, and the most vulnerable group experienced themselves as occupying different worlds and found the borders between them impenetrable. In this case, parents' values and beliefs are continually in conflict with their children, making adaptation to their home world difficult and conflicting. Underlying these distinctions are the qualitative difficulties that students face when trying to traverse the (sometimes radically dissimilar but contiguous) worlds of their family, peers, and school. Congruencies and divergences between worlds can be along any axis (i.e., value-systems, socioeconomics, even locale), such that different settings may or may not afford certain kinds of crossings.

For instance, when linguistically non-English-speaking students move into English-speaking school settings, they must then navigate not only that linguistic obstacle to academic achievement but also the values-obstacle that positions English as desirable and non-English as a problem (Ruiz, 1984). More socioeconomically advantaged Ghanaian

students, with a preexisting fluency in English, may more easily navigate this home/school border linguistically yet still face values-obstacles to academic achievement around language.

### **Current study**

This paper is a part of a larger study that examined the experiences of immigrant adolescent of African descent in urban schools. In this study, our main research questions included: (1) What strategies do Ghanaian-born immigrant adolescent girls use to negotiate and navigate toward academic success across the multiple worlds they encounter in school, with peers, and in family? (2) how do they describe the challenges that impact their ability to navigate these worlds?

### **Method**

In this study, qualitative research methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) were used to explore cross-cultural educational experiences of young Ghanaian-born adolescent girls as they connect, negotiate, and balance interacting with teachers, peers, families, and the school context and the challenges encountered as they strived to achieve academic success. We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with students, parents, and teachers. In the following sections, we describe our participants, data collection and analysis procedures, and our positionalities.

### **Recruitment and participants**

Using purposive sampling (Patton, 1990), forty self-identified Ghanaian-born adolescent female students from four urban schools in New York City were recruited. Initially, student parents (36 in all) were contacted to discuss the study's purpose and to review the consent form. We then followed-up with students whose parents consented and provided an overview letter of the study and assent form. Selection criteria consisted solely of Ghanaian-born, school-age adolescent females.

**Table 1** Demographic information for teachers

<i>Ethnicity of teachers</i>	<i>Subject areas of teachers</i>	<i>Average number of teaching</i>
African Americans n = 3	English (n = 2)	English teachers n = 8 years
Hispanics n = 2	Intensive reading (n = 2)	Reading n = 10 years
Asian n = 1	Mathematics (n = 3)	Mathematics n = 6
Caucasian = 5	Science (n = 3)	Science n = 8
Others [biracial] n = 1	Social Studies (n = 2)	Social Studies n = 12

**Table 2** Demographic information of students and parents.

<i># of years in the US (parents)</i>	<i># of years in the US (students)</i>	<i>Educational level of parents</i>	<i>Age of students</i>	<i>Languages spoken by students and parents</i>
0–5 years n = 8	0–5 years n = 21	High school diploma n = 6	10–14 years n = 12	English, Twi, Fante, Hausa, Ewe, Ga
6–10 years n = 20	6–10 years n = 16	Bachelors' degree n = 20	15–18 years n = 32	
11–15 years n = 6	11–15 years n = 10	Professional degree/Masters n = 10		
15+ years n = 4	15+ years n = 3			

We then recruited teachers from the 40 qualified participants' schools, with selection criteria of at least two years teaching immigrant youth. Out of four schools contacted, teachers from two responded—both having high (68 % and 72 %) African American/ Black student populations—yielding twelve qualified participants. Five self-identified as White, three as African American, two as Hispanic, one as Asian, and one as biracial. On average, teachers had taught for a total of six years and had taught immigrant youth for four; their teaching subjects included English (N = 2), intensive reading (N = 2), mathematics (N = 3), science (N = 3), and social studies (N = 2) (Tables 1 and 2).

## Data collection

### Procedures

Data collection consisted of audio-recorded semi-structured individual and focus-group interviews conducted within a period of eight months. This semi-structured technique allowed for exploration of common topics and themes in a flexible, organic, and probing way (Merriam, 2009). Individual student and parent interviews were conducted in homes, local community centers, or churches. Individual



teacher interviews were conducted at school, either during a free period or after school. All interviews were conducted in English and audio recorded. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality.

### ***Student interviews***

Forty Ghanaian-born immigrant adolescent girls were selected. Individual semi-structured interviews were utilized to gather a rich set of accounts of students' cross-cultural educational experiences as Ghanaian-born adolescent girls attending urban schools. Student interviews explored the participants' demographic backgrounds, educational experiences, and understandings of the factors that impede and promote academic achievements in school. Interviews allowed participants to share their experiences of navigating through the multiple worlds of school, peers, and families and achieve academic success. Through this process, the interviews elicited information about students' multiple worlds. Each individual student interview lasted between 60–90 min.

### ***Focus groups***

Four 90–120 minute, open-ended focus groups of ten students each, two with ten parents each, and one with all twelve teachers were conducted. Focus group interviews afforded further data not only into students', teachers', and parents' shared, and different understandings of cross-cultural educational experiences but also the various ways that student participants interacted with teachers and parents, their diverse academic successes and/or challenges faced, and how they balanced their cross-cultural, multi-world experiences. The parent and teacher focus groups in particular allowed further insights (between group participants as well) to emerge around factors that promote or inhibit academic success in female adolescent immigrants from Ghana.

### ***Authors positionality***

As immigrants and immigrant educators ourselves, we carefully took into consideration our own cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and how our positionalities might influence how we made sense

of the study, specifically in the phases of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Our teaching and cultural experiences as teachers at the elementary, secondary, and college levels provided immense commonalities and differences with participants that influenced, and in many instances, strengthened the individual and focus group interviews. The first author is a first-generation African immigrant and studies literacies of African immigrants and multilingualism in education. The second author is a second-generation African immigrant and expert in identity theory during adolescence. The third author is a first-generation African-born immigrant and former public urban high school teacher (Social Studies and Reading), which influences his interpretations of the data and aided in initiating deeper and more critical conversations with participants around the cultural experiences of Black immigrant students in urban classrooms. The fourth author is a first-generation African immigrant with extensive research experience in quantitative research methods and public health of African immigrants.

Taking into consideration our individual experiences as teachers and researchers in the field of immigrant education prompted our use of reflexivity, both to ensure consistency in data quality and interpretation of data and reduce potential bias, but also to better establish a connection with students around the “commonalities and tensions that emerge[d]” (Milner, 2007, p. 396). This reflexivity process involved constant vigilance for potential biases and an avoidance as much as possible of imposing our perspectives on the participants. We also crosschecked our analyses with colleagues who are themselves familiar with the educational experiences of immigrants.

### ***Data analysis***

After Institutional Review Board approval of the study, we audio recorded transcribed and member-checked all data using open, axial, and selective coded in Nvivo version 11 using the Multiple Worlds Model (MWM) theoretical framework to iteratively analyze the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Given the large multiple data source of the study, we needed an approach that would help identify patterns and different themes across the data. We used constant comparative analysis to code, develop themes, and analyze Ghanaian-born adolescent female immigrant youth, parents, and teachers

shared stories, and followed the three stages of constant comparative analysis coding: open, axial, and selective coding. We also used the multiple worlds to guide the coding procedure (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2013).

Each transcript file was coded using Nvivo version 11. During the first level of analysis, we listened, read, and re-read each interview transcript. We produced multiple memos to help identify and develop emerging about cross-cultural educational experiences and challenges faced by students, and how they balance two worlds of families, schools, and peers, teachers and parents' perspectives. The team identified and developed the following initial categories: "balancing two worlds to cross-cultural experiences," "being female immigrant youth," "navigating through the challenges," "challenges in the classroom," "opportunities to succeed," "academic expectations of parents," and "cultural conflicts with parents." We then refined and organized themes by comparing newly coded data with pre-existing codes, to arrange similar information to that of the consistently labeled accurate code (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In the axial coding stage, we grouped commonly occurring codes across into the central categories and smaller subcategories of cross-cultural educational experiences, successes, and challenges. Given the research questions guiding the study, we were interested in the cross-cultural educational experiences of students both inside and outside of the school contexts and teachers' and cultural knowledge of students' educational experiences. For example, the code of "challenges of cultural life experiences" was subsumed into a larger category of "the burden of being Black adolescent youth in inner city schools," as these challenges in one way or the other influenced their academic success. The researchers examined core categories through case analyses to identify larger themes across all participants (students, teachers, and parents). On reaching saturation and agreeing on the initial lists of codes and categories, we designated 24 codes related to cross-cultural experiences of student participants and larger themes across other participants. Finally, in selective coding, we combined data among categories, where we generated definitions for the codes. We then wrote specific memos to connect data that showed participants' cross-cultural educational experiences, academic success and challenges, and their ability to balance the two

worlds of families, schools, and peers. Particularly, how it affected their academic performance as adolescent female African immigrant youth attending inner city schools.

To establish reliability of the interview data, we sent back interview transcripts to participants to review and confirm statements in the interviews. We spent time with student participants analyzing their views, cross-cultural educational experiences, challenges, crossing two worlds of school, family, and peers, cross-cultural gender insights in school contexts. Researchers sought two peer reviewers (experts in the field of immigrant education and qualitative research) who served as critical readers for the interview transcripts, observation notes, and audiotapes. Interpretations from interview data were returned to participants as a means to crosscheck and corroborate data findings. We also contacted students, parents, and teachers to obtain their views concerning the interview transcripts and to authenticate credibility of our interpretations via the process of member-checking (Merriam, 2009). We used different data sources (individual interviews, and focus group interviews) as a way to promote credibility and combat researcher bias. Triangulation of data was used as an approach to build a line of evidence during data collection.

To enhance validity, we had two peer reviewers serve as critical readers (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) of the interview transcripts, observation notes, and audiotapes and also triangulated the different data sources—individual interviews, and focus group interviews—to offset potential researcher bias (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2013).

## **Findings**

In general, minoritized students multiple worlds of school, peers, and families are separated by gendered socio-cultural, socioeconomic, psychosocial, ethno-linguistical, and structural boundaries (Phelan et al., 1998), which requires them to navigate, as seamlessly as possible, those often discontinuous or mismatched worlds. Major themes in our findings for participants performing these navigations include: balancing their multiple worlds of teachers, parents, and peers, negotiating value-conflicts between authoritative figures in those worlds (above all, parents and teachers, including perceptions and expectations),

dealing with perceived and actual racial and ethnic discrimination and stereotypes, and developing strategies across these challenges to achieve academic success.

### ***Navigating cultural and educational experiences across school contexts***

Participants recounted how past cultural experiences especially influenced how they navigated between the worlds of school and home. For example, Comfort (tenth grade) noted:

I believe that my past cultural and educational experiences helped me to understand some of the things here [US]. I think my cultural experiences both in Ghana and America sometimes give me an advantage in school, especially in Social Studies class because I knew it already or experienced it in Africa.

Esther (eleventh grade) quite explicitly described that having to navigate two cultures (home and school) had made her strong and helped her to adjust and adapt to new cultural and educational environments.

I think to have two cultures (of Ghanaian and now America) helps me to cross from one culture to the other, which allows me to understand ways to adjust to new school procedures and classroom environment in new school.

Whereas these statements indicate that having two cultures afforded experiences helpful for managing, adjusting to, and connecting with teachers, family, and peers in a new setting, they do not yet disclose why this is so. Another student, Mildred (twelfth grade), identified one resource that helped her to balance her two worlds and bicultural experience; “In my case, I was lucky to have a good neighbor who helped me on ways manage and adjust to school and home life in the US” When asked specifically how she managed this balance in school contexts, she replied:

It took some time for me to understand what I need to do as a student, adjust to school environment and I guess when you are eager to succeed, I believe my journey as someone with two cultures has helped me to find ways to overcome some of the challenges and adapt well in school environment and do with grades.

This statement aligns with Phelan et al.'s (1998) Type II (Different Worlds/Border Crossings Managed) interaction, where students are able to develop effective strategies for crossing otherwise disparate but contiguous worlds—in this case, by specifically leveraging cultural/experiential resources (personal or otherwise). Sami (ninth grade) similarly stated:

My parents provide me with most things I need to succeed in school, they provide information and guide me on what I need to do to understand and become successful in school.

Raleigh and Kao (2010) maintain that immigrant parents across all ethnic backgrounds consistently express high academic aspirations for their children; among Black immigrants, similarly, high educational aspirations were expressed for their children (Roubeni et al., 2015). Indeed, immigrant parents in the US generally provide positive educational expectations of their children (e.g., Coll & Marks, 2012; Raleigh & Kao, 2010). For African immigrant parents, academic success is perceived as “the number one key for success” (Dryden-Peterson, 2011, p. 17), along with an expectation that children will attend and complete college. Parents typically support these expectations by offering to help with homework, providing resources (books, laptop, etc.), and giving tips on how to deal with challenges (including how to navigate multiple worlds) for academic success.

Teachers reported that most African-born immigrant parents showed a sense of responsibility by attending parent-teacher organizations and being actively involved in their children's educational progress. One teacher, Mr. Michaels, commented: “My experience with African-born immigrant parents is that they are responsible and are on top of their children's education and eager for them to succeed in school.” Students further indicated that parents often

provided key insights into crossing boundaries using cultural and educational experiences.

Despite this help and support, however, students also understood that this is something that *they* must do. Joanna (tenth grade) explained, “I had no choice except to learn new cultures at both school and home to be able to succeed in school. You have to learn how to balance new experiences in the US with the old Ghana cultures.” According to her, this navigation provided an occasion for learning how to balance new school and classroom environments. This experience is emblematic of student efforts to overcome challenges and transitions to new school/cultural environments when striving to achieve academic success.

### ***Balancing multiple worlds with teachers and peers***

Matilda (ninth grade) highlighted her interactions with teachers. She noted that female teachers especially provided her with support (mentoring, ways to avoid violence and safety, and cultural pointers around class expectations and school/academic success. She noted, “I feel like female teachers or counselors do get what you tell them better and also know the differences as female better than male teachers.” Several participants reported sharing and discussing challenges more often with female teachers than male due to a shared (or perceived similar) emotional and social-life experience. Ama (twelfth grade) noted:

Yeah ... I had the support of my female teachers who understand how my difficulties as a female immigrant student. They help guide me to overcome the challenges as a young girl better than male teachers. I feel comfortable sharing my personal issues with female teachers.

Students admitted that interactions with teachers provided them a pathway for understanding the process of adjusting to an urban US school system. Teacher interactions helped students to share their personal life experiences, challenges, and contribute to class discussions. Moreover, students often relayed having good relationships with peers. They noted that their peers helped them to understand the social, cultural, and educational processes of US schooling (both inside

and outside of the school setting) and to manage the differing worlds of school and home. Sarah (tenth grade) noted:

I have good friends at school and in the neighborhood I live. They are also immigrants from Vietnam, Thailand, and Brazil. We share our stories together and face the same challenges. I have few American friends in school. We are in the same classroom and they are friendly to me despite cultural difference.

Participants also could note instances of tense relationships with their peers. Some mentioned that peers made derogatory comments about their personality and ways of behavior, attitudes, and social life in school, which in turn affected their adaptation and academic progress in school. Susan (eleventh grade) noted:

Most of my peers in school will call you names like Baboon, monkey girl and all sorts of names because you come from Africa. They make fun of my dress and accent – way I speak. It hurts a lot and makes you feel lonely in school.

Silvia (twelfth grade) also shared:

I face challenges of not relating well with my peers in school because some of them make fun of me in class. They call me derogatory names like African monkey, Miss big lips, Ebola girls and kinds of negative names just to infuriate you. These comments have led to bad relationships with some of my peers in school.

Esi (tenth grade) stated:

Yes ... there are many times that some of my classmates call me names like 'Ms. Dark skin,' 'jungle girl,' 'root girl,' 'jungle queen' and use more racial slurs to me both in school and in the neighborhood I live. They also make fun of the way I speak and dress, and I get frustrated about it and then do get into arguments or fight with them. So, this is the sad part of my relationships with classmates.



Summarizing the above, students reported that they smoothly navigated cross-cultural boundaries with peers (albeit with periods of tension due to cultural differences) and that maintaining peer friendships helped them to cross and better understand boundaries between their cultural, social, and educational experiences. Students also explained that their parents had guided them in finding strategies for cultural, social, and educational boundary across different cultural, social, and educational paradigms in order to achieve success in schools. And students also reported that the support of peers and teachers (especially female ones) helped impart additional information for what to do, and how to connect and transition to, their new school environments.

### ***Balancing two worlds with families and school environments***

Students stated that schooling experiences were not smooth in the beginning given that they had to go through a vast array of transitions and academic challenges, at the same time contending with differences in curriculum and pedagogical style. A significant challenge many students brought up during interviews was the stress of balancing their new and old cultural and schooling experiences, which often conflicted with what their parents wanted them to practice at home. Susan (tenth grade) stated:

“My parents wants me to practice American culture in school and Ghanaian culture at home. This has been very difficult for me to do – I mean to practice two cultures.” Amina (eleventh grade) described the experience:

It’s not easy practicing both my home country, I mean Ghana and US cultures at the same time. My parents want me to practice Ghana culture at home and have to do away with at school. This is very confusing for me because I have my freedom to practice which culture I want to do but they – my parents think different. I don’t want to do that because it’s affecting my academic performance ... I have to always do things in two ways.

Students remarked that these conflicts were a result of cultural misunderstandings with their parents and feeling as though they were required to choose one cultural framing over the other. Whereas this

echoes Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001), that immigrant students are often caught in the middle between the culture of their parents and the dominant culture of US society, it has gendered implication as well. When asked if gender played a role in decision-making around which culture to choose, Matilda (tenth grade) noted:

My parents want me to keep the low attitude and not be active [express my opinion] because they believe that as a girl, I'm supposed to be quiet. They always complain that girls don't that ... be a girl and stop that attitude. I feel like I have my choice of what culture I want to choose either Ghana or American culture.

Students appeared to experience cultural dissonance as they underwent cultural conflicts with their parents at home. As noted by Rhodes (2002), immigrant students undergo profound shifts in their sense of self and often struggle to negotiate and connect to the changing circumstances in relationships with parents and peers. But also at school as well, where US/Ghanaian cultural differences often erected barriers to classroom participation and made understanding reading materials, classroom and school procedures, and examples used by teachers difficult. Ivy (tenth grade) noted, "Challenges of managing two cultures of Ghana and US are real and challenging. It is one of my biggest problems I had to deal with every day." Consequently, students must elaborate strategies for balancing these different cultures in order to adjust and achieve academic success.

### ***Dealing with racial and ethnic discrimination and stereotypes***

Most students mentioned instances of racism, racial discrimination, and cross-cultural miscommunication with teachers. Aisha (tenth grade) stated:

Sometimes, some of my teachers ask me questions about Ghana or Africa like, 'Are there schools in Africa,' 'Is it true that there are no roads in Africa' in class. That bothers me because the questions lead other students to make fun of me. Comments like this make it difficult for me to adjust to school here [U.S] and balance different cultures I'm exposed to.

Regina (twelfth grade) related an instance of racial discrimination by a peer. Regina elaborated on a question a student asked her during science class discussion, “How does it feel like sleeping on trees and playing with wild animals?” She responded, “People in Africa do not sleep on trees as shown in movies and the news media here, and animals don’t live with people. They are in the zoos.” When asked if racial discrimination affected her relationship with teachers, school, and peers, Regina commented,

Yes, negative comments from teachers and students affected how I relate to teachers and classmates in school. I feel most of my classmates don’t have good understanding of my cultures and journey to the US. Their negative comments hurt my feelings and create tensions that affect my relationships with peers at school. It also affects how I manage the different transitions in school and focus on my grades because I had to deal with the negativities and tensions in my everyday life.

Research indicates that West African immigrants experience dissonance when US peers and teachers do not understand their heterogeneous cultural values, practices, and identities (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Betty (eleventh grade) also disclosed experiences of discrimination in school:

I had an experience in class where some of my peers refused to do group work with me because of the cultural difference. This is one of my biggest challenges because it affects my relationships with classmates and teachers, who are supposed to help me to transition.

Students reported they are often demoralized by the questions and attitudes of some of their peers who alienate them during group work in class or during other activities in school due to cultural background and identity differences. These also had negative effects on their psychological and social adjustment. Students indicated feeling stereotyped also by the consistent negative portrayals of Africa in some of the textbooks and other media sources teachers use in school.

Teachers expressed a need both to understand the cultural knowledge of immigrant students and to incorporate culturally responsive teaching (including culturally relevant materials and experiences) to help immigrant students participate and engage in classroom activities. Teachers also mentioned that the cultural differences of Ghanaian-born students can lead to difficulty in understanding the curriculum, classroom procedures, and interactive norms with peers. One teacher, Mr. Jones, noted:

Most students from Africa often complain to me that they struggle to understand some of the reading materials in the textbooks and find it difficult to relate to the examples because of the curricular and cultural differences.

Other teachers recounted complaints from students about stereotypes and demeaning remarks made by peers. Ms. Barnes affirmed this, “Yeah... most of them always complain to me [about] racial slurs from their peers and being called names like ‘Jungle Girl’ or ‘Blackie’ in school” According to teachers, these slurs can lead to student frustration and psychological stress, which may result in them feeling unwelcomed at school.

### ***Navigational strategies for succeeding in school***

Most students reported that their ability to view challenges through two worldviews (i.e., Ghana and the United States) allowed them to compare and find ways to overcome those challenges. Abbe (tenth grade) noted, “... you know I always try to compare my life in Ghana to what I’m going through now in the US, I think the experiences I gained in Ghana helps to deal with the challenges. Afua (eleventh grade) also noted:

My past experiences have been a source of motivation and determination to do more in school despite the challenges I face in school. I think having two worlds experience is a plus for me to overcome challenges.

Students discussed that reflecting on their personal experiences motivates them to take advantage of the resources they have in the US, as against the problems in school and their neighborhood. Aisha (eleventh grade) described her academic success:

... Yeah, I believe that my past experiences have helped me to understand how to balance my two worlds of school and family to succeed in school. Despite all the challenges, I have high expectations to succeed in this country, so I work very hard to get better grades.

These reports express the Type VI (Different Worlds/Smooth Transitions) MWM interactions, despite student-perceived differences across their worlds (Phelan et al., 1998). Ama (eleventh grade) also described that being strong in what she does at school allowed her to overcome challenges; “I know from the start that I have to be strong to fit in my new school. I think it’s only good grades that will make me somebody in this country.” Benedetta (eleventh grade) described parental support as significant for her overcoming challenges:

I have to say that my parents advise and guide me on what to do to succeed in school (such as doing homework, taking me to the library on weekends, and communication with my teachers). They always remind me of my background and the need to work extra hard to achieve good grades in school. The stories they share with me kind of motivate me to do more in school despite challenges.

Several students described their parents not only encouraging them to work hard but also providing them resources toward academic success (including parental advice, background experiences, and personal goals). Whereas students found transitions to be difficult, consistent with the Type II (Different Worlds/Border Crossings Managed) MWMW interaction, not only parental support like the above but also access to educational resources (e.g., the library, Internet, textbooks, and help from teachers, and counselors) afforded opportunities for deftly crossing the boundaries of school, peers, and family.

## **Discussion**

Adding to the literature on student-immigrant multiple worlds in US schools (Kumi-Yeboah, 2018; Phelan et al., 1998), in the present study we found that Ghanaian-born immigrant adolescent girls use multiple strategies—e.g., drawing on past experiences and parental/educational support (especially from female teachers) as resources for navigating through new educational settings—to achieve academic

success. However, students' relationships with school, peers, and families were also affected by transitional challenges—including how to balance the worlds of school and families, stressors from perceived and actual racial and ethnic discrimination and stereotypes, and issues around language. Whereas teachers reported providing students with information and skills for how to integrate to new school environments—particularly on the best ways to connect and establish relationships with their peers—students overwhelmingly emphasized their past experiences as helping them manage how to adjust to the new sociocultural and educational environments.

Major cultural differences between the country of origin (Ghana) and the receiving country (United States) often presented two very different forms of schooling and, therefore, adjusting to school environments, pedagogies, and value systems (if not also simply a new language and social culture generally). Despite these differences, the students reported that such experiences afforded them opportunities for developing strategies to adjust to the new school procedures, setting, and communities. This agrees with Spencer (2006), who found that students of color can often readily bridge any traditional beliefs, expectations, attitudes, and behaviors associated with their present cultural contexts (including gender roles, meaning-making, and expressive ways of talking).

Consistent with Phelan et al. (1998), this study's participants faced gulfs across multiple worlds (home, school, peers) that were distinguished by sociocultural, psychosocial, ethnolinguistic, gender, and structural features. Finding ways to successfully navigate through these multiple worlds, the participants exhibited an ability to connect, manage, and negotiate these boundaries and transition through several everyday worlds of school, family, and peers (Phelan et al., 1998). These findings echo and support other studies (Allen et al., 2012; Phelan et al., 1998; Roubeni et al., 2015) that emphasize sociocultural experiences by immigrant students in school as playing a critical role in fostering educational experiences and achievement.

That students faced racial and ethnic discrimination and stereotypes from peers, which can negatively affect academic progress and social adjustments in school (Anzaldúa, 1987), resonates not only as a Type III (Different Worlds/Border Crossings Difficult) interaction but also connects to the discussion of "environment" above. Although students reported combining past cultural and educational backgrounds

with new cultural experiences in the United States—consistent with strategies that can help students achieve academic success (Carter, 2006)—they reflected especially on the hurtfulness of stereotypical remarks at the same time also underscoring a fierce self-determination to succeed.

To this determination can be added more environmentally immigrant-positive attitudes both nationally and locally, because such positive attitudes have been shown to result in better academic achievement among immigrant students. This further aligns with studies (Allen et al., 2012; Kiramba & Oloo, 2019; Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2012) that found cultural factors to have a meaningful impact on African immigrant students' educational experiences specifically. They and others (e.g., Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Roubeni et al., 2015; Traoré & Lukens, 2006) subsequently recommended that any teachers tasked to teach African immigrant students receive professional development training and cultural knowledge about African immigrant youth. That is, whereas cultural insensitivity to immigrant backgrounds is a problem generally, the specific racial history of the United States adds an additional layer to that problem that warrants specific remediation, as does the issue of gender.

At an immediate, "local" level, our findings suggest that for Ghanaian-born immigrant adolescent girls to manage and transition toward academic success, then teachers and school administrators would do well to recognize and support bridging the multiple worlds that these students must navigate to succeed (Yoon, 2012). Whereas Gutiérrez and Orellana (2006, p. 505) have stated that critical analyses of immigrant students' experiences "observed across a range of settings, tasks, and contexts over sustained periods of time are needed to better understand the complexities of their success," key insights into these questions can be found simply by affording space and attention to the voices of those students. The study opens that space and seeks to add to the rich and existing literature on the multiple worlds of Asian and Latina/o immigrant students (Phelan et al., 1998; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Its findings exhibit generally positive home life models for academic success and basic access to educational resources to support that success for participants. Less well-represented are fully adequate social environments in schools, especially when hostile and discouraging elements arise that can affect academic achievement (Anzaldúa,

1987). As such, although expecting or training teachers to be ideally adaptive, culturally competent, and sensitive to every imaginable human culture is entirely unfeasible, measures can be taken to construct and develop curricula and pedagogical practices that meet the needs of our schools' diverse learners (Howard & Terry, 2010; Milner, Pabon, Woodson, & McGee, 2013). Above all, this means being mindful of any cultural assumptions where judgments (positive or negative) might be made.

However, beyond the increasing number of immigrants to the US, the mandate of education generally requires educators, administrators, policy makers, and theorists alike to meet the needs for academic success and social integration for all students (Yoon, 2012). At a minimum, the academic successes of immigrant students shed light on how all students—who, to one degree or another, also straddle multiple worlds—can succeed in school. As such, teachers and policy makers might recognize cultural knowledge and various family cultures as positively contributing factors for shaping the cross-cultural educational experiences of not only (African) immigrant adolescents in the US, but adolescents in the US generally. This will not only foster environments where all students can draw on their “funds of knowledge” to negotiate, connect, and interact with teachers, family, and peers in school contexts but also facilitate efforts to design and implement pedagogical strategies that support and value the cultural experiences that students bring to classrooms (Gay, 2010; González et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2011).

### ***Limitations***

The small sample size of this study limits our understanding of cross-cultural educational experiences of adolescent girls from Ghana. Therefore, it lacks broader perspectives of all immigrant adolescent youth from sub-Saharan Africa who attend inner-city schools. Additional research could explore cross-cultural educational experiences of adolescent immigrant students from other sub-Saharan African countries, such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya.

Another limitation is that that given the positionality of the research team there could be biased in the coding and interpretation of the data, even though great care had been taken to minimize this risk. A longitudinal exploration of the educational experiences of African



immigrant adolescent boys and girls and include other school personal such as guidance counselors and principals would allow for more robust data points and better data triangulation. This approach could deeply capture how immigrant adolescent youth navigate and negotiate gendered migratory sociocultural experiences as related to academic success.

### ***Future directions and conclusions***

In this article, we used the multiple worlds framework to investigate the cross-cultural educational experiences of Ghanaian-born adolescent girls and understand how they negotiate and maneuver through their family, peer, and teacher contexts. In doing so, we highlighted many ways Ghanaian-born adolescent girls successfully navigate these differing boundaries to succeed in school. This study expands on the multiple worlds framework by including gender and demonstrated its importance in influencing the ways Ghanaian-born adolescent girls successfully or unsuccessfully straddle their various worlds. The study demonstrates the need for teachers and educators working with immigrant adolescent girls from Ghana in inner-city schools to understand the instructional and social barriers that stand in the way of the students' ability to successfully navigate US schools. We argue that it is important to consider cross-cultural educational experiences to include resilience and multidisciplinary ways to deepen our understanding of the gendered migration experiences of immigrant youth from Africa. Ghanaian-born adolescent girls have complex cross-cultural experiences that can aid in their quest for academic success. Consequently, teachers must incorporate culturally relevant materials –such as African literature—to help students relate to the course material and allow them to use their own cultural frame of reference to aid in their academic success (Asante, 1991).

In this study, we find that parental support and student determination for navigating the multiple worlds of Ghanaian-born immigrant adolescent girls as they strive for academic success in urban US schools would benefit from greater formal (pedagogical) support, especially around cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes by peers, educational material, and pedagogical customs. In particular, the gendered aspect of this study's participants found that same-gender (female) teachers either provided, or were perceived as able to provide, more support.

In general, the successful academic experiences of immigrant (Ghanaian) girls as they negotiate the contiguous, but often values discontinuous, multiple worlds of school, family, and peers adds materially to the literature on how all students might negotiate their own multiplicity of worlds to achieve academic success—above all, the need for policy-makers, theorists, and practitioners to better leverage student funds of knowledge represented as those multiplicities in school settings. As such, future studies might undertake longitudinal explorations of the educational contexts and experiences of African-born immigrant adolescent boys and girls (including guidance counselors, principals, and other personnel besides teachers). Such an approach would deeply capture how African immigrant adolescents navigate and negotiate gendered migratory sociocultural experiences as they promote or inhibit to academic success.

The study expands on the multiple worlds framework by including the cross-cultural educational experiences of Ghanaian-born adolescent immigrant girls, the gender of immigrant youth, and the ways they navigate borders to overcome the psychological, social, cultural, and educational challenges to achieve academic success. Furthermore, findings highlight the need to acknowledge the role teachers and parents play to provide structures and models to help adolescent girls from sub-Saharan Africa - Ghana to maneuver through and connect their peer, teacher, and family cultures in the US.

The findings suggest that teachers and school administrators need to be better equipped with cultural knowledge of African immigrant students, which will aid them in constructing and developing curriculum and pedagogical practices that meet the needs of our schools' diverse learners (Howard & Terry, 2010; Milner et al., 2013). Moreover, in order to successfully straddle their various worlds and succeed in school, teachers and policy makers must recognize the cultural knowledge and family culture as positively contributing factors that shape the cross-cultural educational experiences of African immigrant adolescents. This will create an environment for students to negotiate, connect, and interact with teachers, family, and peers in the school contexts. More so, exploring the cross-cultural educational experiences of immigrant youth in school is critical as it forces teachers and educators to need to uncover the challenges immigrant adolescent face in the classroom regarding participants and engagement and design pedagogical strategies to support these students as well

as value their cultural experiences they bring to the classroom (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2011).

As indicated in the findings, students faced challenges participating in classroom activities due to their cultural backgrounds and burden of being adolescent immigrant girls from Ghana, thus, teachers should use students' cultural, experienced resources "funds of knowledge" acquired in homes and communities as a force to promote students' participation in the classroom and achieve success (Kiramba & Oloo, 2019; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). This will help teachers to provide accommodations to students to connect, negotiate, and understand school procedures as well as establish relationships with teachers and peers in school.

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