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# “It’s Like They Don’t Recognize What I Bring to the Classroom”: African Immigrant Youths’ Multilingual and Multicultural Navigation in United States Schools

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## **Abstract**

Discourses of African immigrant children are rare in educational research. As such, African immigrant educational experiences are often obscured (in part, owing to the model minority myth about Africans based on higher education degrees received by African immigrants), as well as the actual experiences and realities for African immigrant K-12 students. This qualitative study examines cross-cultural educational experiences of 30 Black African immigrant youth in U.S. schools. The findings reveal multiple participants’ struggles with cultural and linguistic differences, stereotypes and marginalization in the school environment, low expectations from teachers, and

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adjusting to new schooling practices. The African youths' voices exhibited development of resilience and navigation skills. Drawing on Alim and Paris' culturally sustaining model, we propose recommendations and pedagogical implications for preparing globally competent teachers and teacher educators enabled and empowered to teach all twenty-first-century citizens, including African immigrants.

**Keywords:** African immigrants, cross linguistic differences, culturally sustaining pedagogy, educational expectations, model minority

## Introduction

According to the U.S. Census (2012), from 2000 to 2012, the growth of the lawful immigrant population in the United States increased by approximately 14 million, with African immigrant populations comprising one of the fastest-growing populations (McCabe, 2011). Specifically, from 1980 to 2009, the population of African-born immigrants in the United States grew from approximately 200,000 to 1.5 million (McCabe, 2011) and from 1990 to 2000, this population further increased from 364,000 to 881,000, and then within 10 years doubled again, growing from 881,300 to 1,606,914 (US Census, 2014). Children of immigrants represent an important fraction of this population—to date, approximately 25% of all children in the United States; by 2050, immigrant children are expected to represent one-third of the United States 100-million child population (Tienda & Haskins, 2011).

According to Balogun (2011), Black African immigrant youth bring a wealth of diversity, cultural heritage, and past educational experiences to the classroom. However, policymakers and many teachers in U.S. educational contexts are unaware of these culturally diverse and unique educational experiences and skillsets that African immigrant children bring to the classroom (Kiramba & Oloo, 2019). Yet, these students are expected, like other immigrant children, to adapt and assimilate to U.S. culture and discard (or at least mute and make secondary) their prior cultural heritage to function.

Ndemanu and Jordan (2018) have called on teachers of diverse students to deepen their cultural knowledge and competency, especially with respect to children of African descent, as a tool to combat stereotypes and become more informed about students' cultures and educational backgrounds. Ndemanu and Jordan (2018) stated:

It is critical that teachers move beyond seeing their African immigrant students from a deficit lens to understanding their intellects and the rich frames of cultural and linguistic reference they bring to the classroom, which can enrich learning for all if properly exploited. (pp. 77-78)

Children of African immigrants are also typically racially classified demographically (in both educational and research contexts) as “African American” or, more broadly, Black (Ukpokodu, 1996). While invoking a reification of “African” itself elides an immense cultural diversity across an entire continent and risks essentializing the many peoples of the continent, not only can people from the continent at times recognize a positive and sustaining pan-African sense but the same people can also encounter starkly stigmatizing negative perceptions in other contexts. As such, the category African, as distinct from African American, has descriptive *and* analytical power. We insist on the *desirability* of disambiguating demographic data to a more granular degree, especially where those data involve cultural phenomena. There is a major disparity between the experiences of African and African American children in U.S. educational contexts that their conflation as Black creates more difficulties.

Despite increasing demographics of African immigrant children, U.S. educational systems generally do not even recognize their presence or that presence is only poorly reflected in classroom decisions and curricular planning (Harushimana & Awokoya, 2011). As just one example, the greater majority of African immigrant children are multilingual, and multilingual students not only learn differently than monolingual students but also bring to the classroom linguistic resources that go unused without curricular approaches that draw on them (Kiramba, 2017; Kiramba & Oloo, 2019).

In general, scholarship on African children in U.S. schools that takes account of African-born perspectives is rare (Traore & Lukens, 2006), because African-born immigrant students identified and categorized as African American or other in the U.S. educational aggregate data, with less attention to the factors that influence their academic achievement and challenges they face in the U.S. educational systems, specifically in urban schools (Kumi-Yeboah & Smith, 2017). A result of this, however, is not only a neglect of, or a failure to meet

the needs of such students—again, arguably, this is a problem for immigrant children generally—but also specifically overlooks how highly circulated and stigmatizing stereotypes, media misrepresentations, and assumptions about “Africa” in general affect student educational experiences and outcomes (Kiramba & Oloo, 2019).

Perceptions of discrimination through stereotyping have been reported by a number of researchers (Covington-Ward, 2017; Ensor, 2016; Kiramba et al., 2020). Ensor (2016), in a study of South Sudanese students, noted similar stereotypical and discriminatory experiences in Omaha, Nebraska school settings. Ensor asked South Sudanese students to complete the sentence, “Most Americans think that South Sudanese people are . . . .” The responses included “stupid,” “members of gangs,” “savages and violent,” “ignorant,” “primitive Africans,” and so on. Ensor reported that many South Sudanese children were convinced that people in the United States had negative perceptions about them “a sentiment most vehemently expressed by boys and male teenagers” (Ensor, 2016, p. 71). Researchers have reported that children of immigrants from Africa must deal with both the media’s negative images of Africa and the derogatory portrayals of African societies in school curricula (Covington-Ward, 2017; Ukpokodu, 1996).

While previous research has focused on the racial and ethnic identity formations, cultural adaptations, socio-cultural adjustments, and linguistic negotiations among African-born immigrant students in the United States (Davila, 2019; Harushimana & Awokoya, 2011), we agree that more research is needed to unveil the cross-cultural educational experiences of African immigrant children in U.S. K-12 schools (Awokoya, 2012) such that teachers and teacher educators can not only address the needs of this growing population but also to counter a diffuse and prevalent stigmatization of “African-born” students. We believe that knowledge and awareness will help teachers and educators to understand the educational, socio-economic, psychological, cultural, and ethno-linguistic backgrounds of these students in the U.S. schools. These will help to de-stigmatize some of the unfortunate, long-standing perceptions regarding African-born immigrant youth and other minority students attending U.S. schools. For instance, African students in the United States are now currently often saddled with the myth of being the new “model minority” (Ukpokodu, 2018), but this myth does not generally extend, or extends in problematic ways

(Kiramba & Oloo, 2019), to (younger) African student experiences in K-12 settings. Using disaggregated data, Ukpokodu (2018) has shown that the model minority is a myth that obscures the academic realities of African immigrants—a reality that needs a light shone on it in order to support these minoritized students. Moreover, as Ukpokodu (2018) notes, little is known regarding African immigrants into a more granular degree K-12 educational experiences and performances. Hence, their voices are missing when developing culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP).

For the above reasons, this paper agrees with and supports the call to bring attention to the schooling and academic experiences and realities of African immigrant children in U.S. K-12 schools (Ukpokodu, 2013). In addition to the issues noted above, for instance, Harushima and Awokoya (2019) identified negative signs of assimilation among male students—including low academic achievement, gang inclination, and defiance towards authority—and proposed federal, state, and school-level strategies for preventing these trends among young African immigrants in U.S. public schools. Or again, against the circulating myth of a model minority, Bashir et al. (2016) found that only 58% of African (Somali) immigrant students graduated from high school, were underrepresented in advanced classes generally, and severely underrepresented in “talented and gifted” classes. Methodologically, non-disambiguation of data for African students makes obtaining reliably accurate numbers for issues like gang membership or dropout rates problematic (Curry-Stevens & Coalition of Communities of Color, 2013; Reyes & Curry-Stevens, 2014; Traore & Lukens, 2006), much less trying to understand root causes of these phenomena. Calling urgently for educational reform, Curry-Stevens and Coalition of Communities of Color (2013) aptly outline this underlying challenge:

While data shows we have high levels of university degrees, we also have high levels of those who have not graduated high school. We also believe, but do not have the “hard” data (yet) to back this up, that our children are [dropping out of] school in high numbers, departing from an unwelcoming environment which has been very difficult and holds little prospect for reform. (p. 49)

Curry-Stevens and Coalition of Communities of Color (2013) above highlight the shortfalls of the model minority narratives (Ukpokodu, 2018) that tend to construct incomplete accounts of African immigrants.

### **Purpose of the study**

In a context where educators typically possess cultural and linguistic backgrounds very different from those of their students (Ladson-Billings, 2011), and where the teaching of African-born learners (Ukpokodu, 1996) often derives (sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly) or draws from stereotypical, media-generated images that portray Africans and African lifestyles as primitive, impoverished, and underdeveloped (Balogun, 2011; Covington-Ward, 2017), this study uses a framework of CSP (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014) in order to propose curricula supportive of the needs, and contrary to the (positive and negative) stigmatizations, of African immigrant K-12 students in U.S. classrooms.

Specifically, we examined the cross-cultural educational experiences of 30 African immigrant youth in U.S. K-12 schools, focusing on their school experiences as culturally and linguistically diverse learners interacting with peers, teachers, and significant others across the U.S. school cultures. The purpose of this research was to understand both the affordances that African immigrant youth bring to the classroom as well as any inhibiting factors that can affect their academic success (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2009)—particularly any stigmatizing narratives about “Africa” that can marginalize students and provide classroom experiences that leave them feeling frustrated, lost, and/or confused (Awokoya, 2012; Traore & Lukens, 2006) or at risk for dropping out or lowered academic achievement (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2009). Overall, this research was guided by the research question: How do African immigrant youth describe their cross-cultural educational experiences in the U.S. classrooms?

## Theoretical framework

This study uses CSP (Paris & Alim, 2014) as a framework for understanding the impact of multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice among African immigrant youth in U.S. K-12 classrooms. According to Paris (2012), CSP has the “explicit goal [of] supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers” (p. 95). CSP is built on the foundational work on culturally responsive education by Cazden and Leggett (1978) as well as Ladson-Billings’ (1995) conception of culturally relevant pedagogy (also see Gay, 2000). Specifically, CSP moves beyond simple cultural relevance in pedagogy to supporting the cultural experiences of minority youth; that is, it “seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). Paris and Alim (2014) suggest that CSP’s two most important tenets are a focus on the plural and evolving nature of youth identity and cultural practices, as well as a commitment to embracing youth culture’s counterhegemonic potential while maintaining a clear critique of the ways in which youth culture can also reproduce systemic inequalities. The concept of CSP helps to democratize schooling by “supporting both traditional and evolving ways of cultural connectedness for contemporary youth” (Paris, 2012, p. 95).

Ladson-Billings (1995) also offers a theory of culturally responsive education, positing that teachers must not only be specifically trained to interrupt social and educational inequity but also use critical pedagogy’s emphases on sociopolitical consciousness with a multicultural education commitment toward culturally diverse content. Teachers often assess their students’ personal lives—including family structures, interests, beliefs, values regarding schooling, and past educational experiences and performance with subject matter—through the demographic, religious, and sociopolitical lenses of the community in which they teach (Gay, 2000). The purpose of CSP in this study is to extend this dialogue both to new domains in the schooling experiences and challenges of African immigrant youth. As such, CSP provides a lens through which to view and understand the cross-cultural educational experiences and challenges of African immigrant youth.



## **Methodology**

### ***Participants and setting***

Recruited students who consented to be in the study originated in (and migrated to the United States with their parents from) Ghana, Ethiopia, and Nigeria, were 53.3% male ( $n = 16$ ) and 46.7% female ( $n = 14$ ), and ranged from age 15 to 18 in grades 10 ( $n = 8$ ), 11 ( $n = 10$ ), and 12 ( $n = 12$ ). Table 1 summarizes participant demographic information. Following IRB approval for the study, we used in-depth, semi-structured personal interviews as well as focus group discussion to collect data from 30 purposively (67%) or snowball (43%) sampled African-born immigrant students at a high school in a U.S. metropolitan area with a large concentration of African-born immigrant populations. Inclusion criteria were (1) African-born students, male or female, (2) currently enrolled in the (urban) high school, and (3) without refugee or asylee status. In all cases, parental consent and student assent were obtained from qualified participants.

Overall ethnic demographics for the high school participants attended included: African American (63%), White (12%), Hispanics (18%), Asian (4%), Native American or Pacific Islander (2%), and Other/Multi-Racial (1%). The school district also provides workshops and professional development trainings for teachers on teaching second language teaching as well as opportunities for teachers and administrators to take courses on teaching English language learners with and without disabilities. However, they offer few or no workshops around teaching immigrant students from Africa.

### ***Data collection***

Data collection consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant as well as focus group discussions. Interviews lasted from 60 to 120 minutes, took place in settings comfortable to participants, typically homes and on weekends, and without the students' parents present. The interview asked open-ended questions relating to participant educational backgrounds and their reflections on cross-cultural experiences in U.S. schools and collected answers on the topics of (a) demographics, including gender, age, grade level, number of

**Table 1.** Summary of participant demographic information.

<i>Student (pseudonym)</i>	<i>Country of origin</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Number of years in the United States</i>	<i>Language(s) spoken</i>
Tariff	Ethiopia	18	M	12th	5	Amharic, English
Michael	Ghana	18	M	12th	4	English, Twi, Ewe
Abba	Ethiopia	16	F	10th	4	Amharic, English
Gabriel	Nigeria	16	M	10th	3	English, Hausa
Max	Ghana	17	M	11th	4	English, Fante Twi
Sababa	Nigeria	18	F	12th	5	Yoruba, English
Aliza	Ghana	16	F	10th	3	English
Mannaseh	Ethiopia	16	F	10th	4	English, Amharic
Adriana	Ghana	16	F	10th	3	English, Twi
Ekuna	Nigeria	16	M	11th	5	English, Igbo
Ahmed	Nigeria	17	M	11th	2	English
Muhammad	Ethiopia	14	F	9th	3	English, Amharic
Kwame	Ghana	16	M	11th	4	Twi, English
Avishah	Ethiopia	17	F	12th	3	English, Amharic
Peku	Ghana	15	F	10th	4	English
Tuafi	Nigeria	17	M	11th	3	Arabic, English
Emulu	Nigeria	16	F	10th	5	English, Yoruba
Manuwaa	Ghana	18	F	12th	4	English
Sulimana	Ethiopia	18	M	12th	5	English, Amharic
Josephine	Ghana	15	F	10th	2	English, Twi
Oluya	Nigeria	17	M	11th	4	English, Hausa
Saranaa	Ethiopia	16	M	10th	4	Amharic, English
Amina	Nigeria	17	F	11th	6	English, Hausa, Yoruba
Mensah	Ghana	18	M	12th	3	English
Malik	Ethiopia	16	M	10th	4	English
Patricia	Ghana	16	F	10th	4	English, Twi
Nasira	Nigeria	17	M	12th	5	English, Igbo
Ayishana	Ethiopia	17	F	11th	3	English, Arabic, Amharic
Nahishi	Nigeria	18	M	12th	5	English, Yoruba
Bakari	Nigeria	15	M	10th	4	English, Hausa

years in the United States, and parental educational level and state of residence, (b) daily, academic, and/or extracurricular interactions and experiences with new and prior teachers, school leaders, other students, and classroom settings, and (c) coping strategies used to adapt and adjust to the new school and relations with peers and teachers in the classroom. Interviews were conducted in English, recorded, transcribed, and member-checked to enhance validity of the data.

Additionally, we conducted three focus group interviews over a total 2.5 hours of focus group interviews within a six-month period, transcribed, and anonymized to protect the identity and confidentiality of participants. Focus group interviews not only enabled participant shared understandings of their cross-cultural educational experiences

but also afforded an opportunity for the researchers to triangulate data from the one-on-one interviews (Olsen, 2004).

### ***Data analysis***

We used the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) to analyze interview transcripts. This allowed us to investigate thoroughly the contextual nature of participants' responses and explore trends across diverse school and home sites. In the first phase of analysis, we listened to, read, and re-read each interview transcript multiple times in order to develop a holistic sense of the data. In open coding, we identified themes and patterns by breaking up the data into discrete "incidents" coded into categories, where we systematically engaged in constant comparative method of analysis with every transcript to locate patterns for each interview (Charmaz, 2014), and a focused coding protocol identified central and underlying themes in responses. The identified codes were compared and researchers' agreed-upon codes were then grouped into overarching focus codes, that is, "role of crosscultural educational experiences," "challenges in school," and "relations with teachers and peers." We consistently returned to the initial interviews by adding and revising codes. We wrote memos investigating emergent categories and trends within those categories. Instead of relying on preconceived ideas, theories emerged through the iterative analysis process. Themes were accurately rendered and organized in light of the study's research question (Charmaz, 2014).

### ***Authors' positionality***

As immigrants and immigrant educators ourselves, we 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. All three authors are first-generation African immigrants and educators in higher education. We have taken into consideration our individual experiences as teachers and researchers in the field of immigrant education to ensure consistency in data quality and interpretation of data and to reduce potential bias.

## Findings and discussion

Data analysis yielded five key themes discussed below in detail.

### *Stereotypes of African cultural identity*

Most participants (89%) revealed that they felt a sense of rejection and discrimination from teachers and students and revealed that students often made derogatory comments towards them such as, “Do you live with wild animals?” “No African in this group,” and “I don’t want to get sick by touching you, please move on—are you not from Africa?” (Tariff, grade 12, from Ethiopia). Most participants (84%) also explained how these comments led to a sense of frustration and made them feel unwelcome at school. Participants agreed that persistent stereotypes based on their African culture and identity affected their academic achievement. For example, Michael (grade 12, from Ghana) noted:

Most of my classmates call me names like “Monkey Boy” and all sorts of names because I’m from Africa. It’s uncomfortable to be in a school where students make negative comments about you because of your identity as African and Black. It makes you feel ashamed of your African identity. You become emotionally disturbed and confused. I know some students from Africa who do not want to be identified as African because of all these negative stuffs [sic].

Another student Abba (grade 10, from Ethiopia) stated:

One of my teachers openly said to me in class that we will go on a field trip and she hopes that will make me happy because the class will visit a forest reserve/nature park.... These comments create stress and affected my academic achievement, especially in the past two years, because I feel ashamed and unwelcome.

Stereotypes formed a major obstacle to self-identification as African as Michael has noted above, and, created feelings of rejection for

African students, analogized by the quotes. Some participants indicated that they managed to overcome these stereotypes and felt that they were excelling in school. Gabriel (grade 10, from Nigeria) noted his resiliency: “I had to be strong to overcome the negative sayings from my peers and some teachers to fit in and succeed in school.” Max (grade 11, from Ghana) also commented:

I have to find ways to overcome the stigma and how people make fun about my African identity as not being good. My parents are aware of these negative comments and coached me on how to do away with it and work hard in school to succeed. Honestly, I’m proud of my identity and think that has shaped me to be successful in school despite these challenges.

Parental advice was key to developing skills to deal with stereotypes and as the participants above emphasize, the participants were proud of their African heritage. Participants discussed that teachers appeared to be as complicit as students around discrimination and marginalization. Such statements reflect the larger challenges faced by African immigrant youth as they adjust to the U.S. educational system. Researchers have reported that children of immigrants from Africa must deal with both the media’s negative images of Africa and the derogatory portrayals of African societies in school curricula (Covington- Ward, 2017; Ukpokodu, 1996). Other studies have shown that Africans are portrayed as primitive, underdeveloped, and diseased people living in an unproductive continent (Traore & Lukens, 2006), statements echoed in Tariff’s observation above. Similarly, with respect to Max’s observation above, Obsiye and Cook (2016) found that young people constructed their self-image and social identity performance in opposition to othering discourses and marginalization they had experienced. In this study, students specifically underlined how such stigmatization raises obstacles to their academic achievement.

From the immigrant student perspectives, this study manifestly highlights how a lack of knowledge concerning African immigrant student cultural backgrounds led to perceived and actual discrimination, which consequently negatively impacted student academic progress. This finding parallels several studies (Awokoya, 2012; Mthethwa-Sommers & Harushimana, 2016; Traore & Lukens, 2006), which reported

that teachers are generally not knowledgeable about the educational system, cultures, or socioeconomic conditions in African countries generally and/or lacked basic multicultural awareness about Africa and Africans (Traore & Lukens, 2006).

### ***Marginalization in the school environment***

A majority of participants reported classroom marginalization of various sorts. Sababa (grade 12, from Nigeria) described her experience:

I don't know the reason but, my most of my peers refuse to be in the same group with me. They will nicely ask the teacher to join another group. Sometimes in some of my classes I have to do my work with the teacher. I felt isolated in group work or class discussions—any time you talk, students and teachers start laughing and other unpleasant stuff.

Students described completing group work, often, individually due to isolation. Examples like Sababa's above were common among this study participants. Participants (84%) reported perceptions and/or experiences of marginalization in school.

Participants described feeling unmotivated to participate in class discussions due to social and psychological emotions resulting from non-acceptance. Aliza (grade 10, from Ghana) described how being marginalized in her new school affected her academic achievement:

When your teachers don't ask you any questions even if you raise your hand to contribute, then it affects you. Africa is not represented in the textbooks and materials we read in class. Anytime we learn about Africa, then it's about the negatives—*wars, diseases, poverty, hunger, and famine*. I feel like my cultural background is marginalized in the classroom and textbooks. Some of my classmates also make fun of me about photos and readings about Africa. *I know for a fact we African students hardly participate in sporting activities at school because of the isolation and discrimination. It made me skip classes and get bad grades that semester.*

Aliza's example above speaks to under-representation and misrepresentation of Africa in the U.S. curricula. This is an issue that has lingered as demonstrated in earlier research that U.S. education does neither adequately recognize presence of African immigrants nor reflect their presence in classroom decisions and curricular planning (Harushimana & Awokoya, 2011) and that depictions of African cultures that occur in Western media and books are often blurred with stereotypes (Harushimana & Awokoya, 2011). Harushimana and Awokoya (2011) note that the Eurocentric model in U.S. schools alienates African-born minority students in U.S. classrooms and only minimally reference Africa or African cultures as part of their education.

Marginalization in school environment included unwelcome gestures in advanced classes and perceived mistreatments in classes. Adriana (grade 10, from Ghana) commented, "I remember this year, I had all advanced classes and I walked in class and I remember the teacher asking me, are you sure you're in the right classroom." Ekuna (grade 11, from Nigeria) described her experience as follows:

I've observed that here in the United States, Black students are mostly in danger in schools, because I've seen how some teachers treat black students horribly in class. I'd just see a teacher yelling at a black student for no reason or writing referrals for no reason and you see a lot of discrimination against students that looks like me going on in my school.

Messiou (2006), framing marginalization as a group dynamic, particularly highlights the damage caused by marginalizing children's voices in school settings. As such, where stigmatization involves the perpetuation of negative images and stereotypes, marginalization involves the exclusion, silencing, or pushing aside of countervailing images or experiences that could contradict stigmatization. In Aliza's observation, for instance, she describes how she felt unsupported in her new school because all curricula materials excluded her cultural background or portrayed Africa as a continent negatively (war, poverty, diseases, etc.). The participants' quotes, taken collectively, illustrate experiences of marginalization in school and how their academic progress is hindered by the negative depictions of Africa or Africans in the classroom and curricula materials.

Marginalization in school environments (both inside and outside of classrooms) has been reported in earlier research with African immigrants (Kiramba et al., 2020). These experiences lead to African youths' questioning their identity and developing self-doubt regarding their abilities. Watson and Knight-Manuel (2017) noted not only that West African youth tended to downplay their identity as Africans owing to derogatory stereotypes but that negative stereotypical curricular images enhanced the gap between African students and African Americans in negative ways. Ukpokodu (2018) also highlighted a range of dehumanizing treatments that African immigrant students have received in U.S. K-12 schools and that affected their academic outcomes.

### ***Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural experiences***

Learning a new language plays an important role in the lives of immigrant students as they experience the new educational setting and become socialized in U.S. schools. The majority of participants (85%) expressed challenges in communication resulting in poor personal relations with peers and academic challenges. Participants expressed difficulty in adjusting to their new environments as a result of language and cultural differences. Kwame (grade 11, from Ghana) elaborated, "I struggled to communicate with my teachers and making friends because of my accent . . . to communicate and socialize with other students. This makes it difficult for me to participate in class." Mannaseh a 10th grader from Ethiopia lamented, "It's hard for me to communicate to some teachers and students because of my accent. Sometimes some of the students and teachers complain they don't understand me. I feel embarrassed all the time—it's affecting my schoolwork."

Language barriers were reported to place insurmountable pressures on African-born immigrant students to perform academically. For example, Philip (grade 10, from Nigeria) explained:

Even though I speak fluent English coming from Nigeria, I'm still in the process of learning it in (the United States). I still have some difficulties understanding how people speak to me; teachers and students in my new school. I guess my classmates have a hard time understanding what I say to them. My problem in school is that most of the readings in



class have a different cultural context and that makes it difficult to understand them. I have been in the United States for three years and am still struggling to deal with cultures and language communication. The content of most reading materials is not culturally relevant to me. It has affected my grade in some of my classes.

Peku (grade 10, from Ghana) recounted:

Also, having the accent made it harder to communicate with other people because I will have to constantly repeat myself and that was very frustrating. Eventually, you end up giving up on a conversation, because you end up with repeating yourself three to four times saying the same thing over and over again.

The excerpts above collectively suggest experiences of linguistic discrimination based on their variety of English (dialects and accents). Perceived linguistic discrimination on immigrant students has negative effects on their language use in classroom interactions. For example, Medvedeva (2010) reported that discrimination influenced English language proficiency of children. It is also associated with lower oral language use, specifically “that perceived discrimination has a negative influence on adolescents’ level of comfort with their English language skills” (Medvedeva, 2010, p. 14). Although communication appeared to pose a significant barrier, the participants reported that parental support and affirmations helped them to do well and was key for supporting them acculturate to their new learning environment. For example, Tuafi (grade 11, from Nigeria) noted, “Being pushed by my parents like teachers has given me the opportunity to achieve everything that I needed. Having that social connections that anytime I am in difficulties I can go to somebody else and ask for help.” Emulu (grade 10, from Nigeria) chronicled her experience as follows: “Making the grades is not as easy as they look, but your family and the other people believe that oh it’s doable. You have to put hard work in.”

Asked how they negotiate the cultural differences in the United States compared to their country of origin, Manuwaa (grade 12, from Ghana) responded:

I just really love school, I'm one of the few people who can say that at my school, like I love it. Like, I actually have a pleasure learning and I think it also has a factor with trying to please my parents since they are African-born immigrants, and expects a lot from me and also to succeed in this great country.

Taken together, linguistic differences (dialects and accents) posed social and academic challenges for participants, although all the participants had been educated in English in their former countries. This corroborates a study by Creese (2010) who noted that immigrants find their linguistic competencies erased and experience linguistic struggles to assert their knowledge. Similarly, He et al. (2017) demonstrated and challenged a persistent deficit-thinking trend attributed to immigrants and refugee populations living in the United States by showcasing the many forms of (social) capital available in immigrant communities—particularly the multilingual and multiliterate (Arabic and English) character of Sudanese immigrants and native English Liberians, whose language was stigmatized due to accent. Alim and Paris (2017) describe this situation as a “saga of cultural and linguistic assault [that] has had and continues to have devastating effects on the access, achievement, and well-being of students of color in public schools” (p. 1). The participants in study maintained their multilingual identity as Africans, congruent with Davila (2019).

### ***Low teacher expectations***

The participants reported perceived low expectations in academic performance. The majority of participants (86%) expressed that they worked extremely hard in school to get good grades and demonstrated positive sentiments and aspirations about their academic achievements. Despite the perception of most African immigrant students as hard-working outperformers when compared to other minority groups (Awokoya, 2012), findings in this study reveal that this perception failed to affect many teachers who otherwise regarded African-born immigrant students as low achievers; more precisely, as we did not collect data from teachers, this speaks to student perceptions

and experiences of such low expectations experienced from teachers. Sulimana (grade 12, from Ethiopia) shared:

My case is disturbing, because of the misunderstanding with teachers. I was placed in special education class because they [teachers] didn't understand me. I guess they did not understand my past schooling experience in Africa. After one year, I was pulled back to another class because my teachers said that I was not challenged enough. This affected my academic progress because I was not challenged in special education class.

As Sulimana puts it, it is actually “disturbing” for a teenage student who is advanced but—rather than celebrating his excellence—is constantly faced (like Josephine reports) with a “not in the right place” perception. This report indicates how teachers, and sometimes school leaders (in particular, school counselors), can perceive African immigrant students as having low academic abilities. Saranaa (grade 10, from Ethiopia) noted the low teachers' low perceptions regarding academic performance, “because stereotype of race has conditioned them to believe . . . without even giving the child an actual chance.” This finding substantiates other studies that reported low expectations of African immigrant students from both teachers and peers (Creese, 2010; Kiramba & Oloo, 2019; Schroeter & James, 2015). Schroeter and James (2015) discuss the educational experiences of a group of French-speaking, African-born students attending a French school who had entered Canada as refugees. These immigrants were placed in a separate program designed to meet their particular needs given their language proficiency skills and level of education. The African-born students felt that the separate program did not allow them to achieve their full potential and that they would have preferred to be in a more challenging program that would help them go to college and find employment in their desired fields. African-born students saw themselves as linked to a particular racialization and did not have legitimate ways to share their frustration or “the feelings of social exclusion they experienced at school and in the larger society” (Schroeter & James, 2015, p. 35). Similarly, Mthethwa-Sommers and Harushimana (2016) noted misperceptions and lacks of knowledge

about Africa on the part of educators that can perpetuate colonializing and deficit-lens discourses and misconstruals about past African student educational experiences—misperceptions that, in turn, can result in (deliberate or accidental) refusals to acknowledge or draw on African students' linguistic and intellectual/cultural resources. Mthethwa-Sommers and Harushimana (2016) point out that race complicates the experiences of Black immigrants, given that teachers' racial identities and knowledge about Africa can exert substantial influence over how they instruct and respond to African-born students' needs. Teacher and peer expectations of African immigrant students shape the classroom dynamic and may be attended through embracing different forms of capital each student brings to the classroom.

### ***Adjustment challenges***

Although African immigrant youth bring not only a plethora of socio-cultural and educational experiences to the classroom but also past experiences that affect their adjustment and adaptation to new educational systems, the majority of participants (85%) reported struggling to adjust to differences of pedagogical delivery and classroom procedures. Reflecting on the challenges of adjusting to new teaching and learning styles, Amina (grade 11, from Nigeria) stated:

What I know is that my culture is not represented in the books and materials we read in class. Everything is so foreign to me, which makes it difficult to understand some of the materials I read in class. Teachers teach differently than I'm used to. It's like they don't recognize what I bring to the classroom. This is one of my biggest challenges—it's one of the reasons I'm not doing well now.

Mensah (grade 12, from Ghana) amplified this:

I have to adjust to the culture that we are in now and the culture that we had back home, so sometimes it's difficult for [teachers] to understand what you mean, because they are right and you are wrong.

Amina and Mensa's statements regarding cultural differences, pedagogical approach differences and curricular are illustrative of the majority of participants' experiences as they adjusted to new setting. Participants also indicated the need to integrate to fit in, example, Patricia (grade 11, from Ghana) noted: "It's hard for [non-immigrants] to accept you, when you are not adjusted to their culture."

Collectively, participants reported challenges around understanding new teaching and learning processes due to the differences in curricula and instructional delivery methods, lack of reference to what students already knew (cultures, languages, content, etc., and cultural misunderstandings). Unfamiliarity with the cultures and languages ultimately affected participants' grades.

Despite these challenges, however, participants resiliently put more effort into their schoolwork as their key to a better future. Nasira (grade 12, from Nigeria) noted that she had to persevere and put in more effort: "If you don't have good grades, you can't get a good education, and without a good education, you can't get a good job." Nasira also recounted encouragement received from parents to do well in school. Ayishana (grade 11, from Ethiopia) elaborated:

I recently started doing high school courses as a middle schooler, and my dad, throughout the summer . . . we were doing, like, rigorous challenges and stuff, and when we came back from summer vacation I was falling behind. I remember I got a C on a quiz and I remember my dad was trying to keep it cool, but for some reason, I wasn't getting it [the curriculum] and it took me having to try really, really hard. I've never had to try that hard in math before but in the end, it was good.

This finding is substantial given that scholars have decried the dearth of research exploring the cultural and academic adaptation of African immigrant students in the United States (Hersi 2011). This study highlights the lack of reference to Africa in reading materials/curriculum as a demotivating factor when educating African immigrants, together with both a failure to build on what participants already know and also unfamiliarity with cultures within and outside school. The findings of the current study suggest that schools can make a significant difference in the lives of immigrant students by

building on students' prior understandings, expanding the curricula to include global and multicultural materials, while also creating awareness regarding appreciation of cultural differences. This finding amplifies earlier findings by Harushimana and Awokoya (2011) who examined the U.S. education curriculum vis-a-vis immigrant minorities from non-predominant cultures and argued that:

- (a) The subscription to a Eurocentric curriculum model alienates African-born minority students in U.S. classrooms; and
- (b) The minimal reference [to] Africa and African cultures, as well as instances of their misrepresentation in the curriculum, is antithetical to the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy (p. 35)

These challenges notwithstanding, participants optimistically reported navigating the educational terrains in the new land. One participant, Bakari (grade 10, from Nigeria) shared a navigational skill to fellow immigrant students during a focus group discussion, advising:

Do not force yourself to be American; be yourself; focus on you—books; parties will come later and always try to make friends with people not of your culture, but of a different race so that you can understand different cultures when it comes to networking.

This desire or need (or advice) to connect with others has numerous echoes in the literature. Covington-Ward (2017) demonstrated how one participant's efforts in their study to connect with African Americans were troubled by the others' lack of knowledge about Africa and the many stereotypes they had about the continent and its peoples.

## **Discussion and recommendations**

This study explored cross-cultural educational experiences of African-born (Ghanaian, Nigerian, and Ethiopian) immigrants in a metropolitan (urban) high school in the United States. Overall, that participants

reported hindrances around language and cultural misunderstandings, stereotyping, marginalization and low expectations at in academic settings, and challenges to academic acculturation or adjustment that impacted their academic progress all put into question the current “model minority narrative” for such African-born immigrant students (Ukpokodu, 2018).

Successful academic outcomes for all students in U.S. schools are not only a moral goal of education but also a socioeconomic necessity. As such, the increasing numbers of African-born immigrant students in K-12 schools require school policy and practice to acknowledge and integrate the educational experiences of immigrant students as they interact with teachers, school leaders, and other students in classrooms to achieve academic success; equally, hindrances to such success must be countered and eliminated. Culturally sustaining pedagogies enable new and enhance any existing such processes and efforts (Paris & Alim, 2014).

This study provides valuable information for teachers, educators, school leaders, and policymakers regarding the educational experiences of a population of immigrant learners often overlooked or not properly understood in U.S. K-12 schools. Even where progress is occurring, Harushimana and Awokoya (2011) can note that multicultural education advocates still face major challenges in conceptualizing a curriculum model that acknowledges and draws on the cultures represented in a classroom. While they recommend implementation of a curriculum that creates or draws on intercultural connections to empower the different cultures represented in classrooms, this requires teachers be trained to create spaces where immigrant students’ cultural lives outside of school better inform curricular design and practice in classroom while also effectively supporting the learning of all students (Gay, 2000). Against the logistical challenge of somehow meeting “all” cultures in a classroom, it seems more than basic and elemental to at least counteract the kind of stigmatization, stereotyping, and marginalization described by the majority of participants in this study. Multicultural education represents one way not only to disrupt such prevailing negative stereotypes towards African-born students (Banks, 2014) but also “a central way of teaching respect for difference and part of the continuing process for redefining the common American culture” (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003, p. 56).

The incorporation of multiculturalism into U.S. school curricula can bring about, or even increase, student willingness to learn and be engaged (Banks, 2014; Nieto, 1999). Consistent with the efforts of multicultural education, the present study underscores a need for teachers to be better prepared not only to respond to extra-linguistic, extra-racial, extra-ethnic, and extra-cultural differences of African immigrant youth dissimilar to their own but also to reduce racialized discrimination. While we recognize that the myriad of human cultures renders infeasible any proposal for teachers to be aware of *every* culture present in their classroom, the clear, logical, and feasible alternative to this involves a curricular flexibility within classrooms that makes space for the full range of such student cultures; here, again, is where CSP grounds the relevance of its proposals (Paris & Alim, 2014).

Making space to understand other cultures in the classroom is not a threat to some common or shared U.S. values; rather, it seems the only feasible means for realizing those values by helping both to assure academic success while also combating or removing hindrances to that success. Such a culturally sustaining approach will help teachers and students alike to recognize cultural diversity of all sorts, not only as an end in itself (which is socially beneficial in an ultimate sense) but also as a means for scaffolding a maximum of academic success in any student cohort. This recommendation is in line with those made by Harushimana and Awokoya (2011) for the U.S. curriculum.

Carter (2007), in study of Black and Latino youth in New York, coined the term “multicultural navigators” to refer to students who harbored dreams of upward mobility through images of hip-hop stars while at the same time retaining their social and cultural origins (p. 150). Becoming a multicultural navigator means that educators, researchers, teachers, and students are willing to recognize the multiple forms of capital that varying background afford. To be successful multicultural navigators requires learning from, and about, the capitals within communities—as resources to be utilized for uplifting inherent strengths and enhancing different ways of learning and being in the world (Franquiz & Ortiz, 2018).

If students (all students) can be fairly asked to navigate educational spaces toward success, then there can still be support structures to better enable that adjustment (as well as cross-linguistic and cross-cultural challenges) in cases where past non-familiarity with



the terrain of U.S. education occurs. At the same time, this navigation is bi-directional, especially where stigmatizing stereotypes within the school space go unchecked both emotionally traumatizing and academically low-expecting norms. This study calls, then, for culturally sustaining and globally competent educators able to facilitate multiple cultural frameworks at once to create a respectful and humanizing learning space supportive of all students.

No *good* argument exists for pedagogic settings or practices that denigrate, marginalize, or stigmatize any person—whether as instructor comments or expectations, in curricular content or gaps of non-representation within them, with respect to policies or procedures, or in the interactional dynamics between educational stakeholders. From this immovable insight and the data of this study alike, it follows reasonably and logically

- that educators recognize that allowing or making disparaging comments about students' linguistic patterns or cognitive abilities not only affect those students' self-esteem and learning motivation but also have no place in a classroom
- that policymakers and curricular designers create and provide stereotype-free instructional content and materials for use in classrooms that demeans no person
- that school leaders and faculty alike evaluate any instructional materials, especially films and videos, used in teaching about foreign places (but especially Africa) to exclude any stereotyping content that shames or dehumanizes immigrant students
- and that culturally sustaining pedagogies will engage classrooms, as necessary, in deconstructing negative and biased discourses as they arise in order to create spaces in which all students face only their own personal limitations on the way to academic success

We place these recommendations in an already large and generous framework of CSP itself on behalf of *all* students, but must still remind the reader of the particularly acute, chronic, and especially de-meaning imagery and ideas still widely circulated about that reification “Africa”—a place still assumed and imagined in all seriousness too often by U.S. teachers, school leaders, and other students alike as a backward and dark continent, a primitive jungle full of starving,

emaciated, and skeleton-like people, if not a disease-ridden backwater overrun by Ebola children (Ukpokodu, 2018). That this persistence of stereotypes is likely shocking and incredible stands alongside Michael's report above of being called Monkey Boy. It is in response to this rightly shocking background that the imperative for CSP makes its most basic appeal—an appeal that has as its final goal not only a humanistic ethos of respect for all people but also the socioeconomic good of successful educational outcomes for all students.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the cross-cultural educational experiences of African immigrant youth in U.S. schools with a focus on academic experiences and implications. The findings show, consistent with other research, that African immigrant youth face cross-cultural obstacles from language, communication, and cultural differences, low academic expectations from teachers and peers, and difficulties navigating new and radically unfamiliar classroom processes. In particular, this study revealed not only that participant academic performance especially suffered from stereotyping and marginalization (by teachers and peers) based on their racial, linguistic, cultural, and ethnic identities but also that in some cases students were resiliently able to overcome this stigmatization and achieve academic success.

This stereotyping also generated emotional challenges for the students as they acculturated to the U.S. academic systems. Marginalization and rejection led participants to experience social and psychological trauma, which ultimately may have affected their ability to perform well in school thereby decreasing the quality and quantity of academic engagement. As such, a CSP (Paris & Alim, 2014) is relevant and necessary, especially in its goal to actively support multiculturalism and diversity not only for the sake of respecting all students, regardless of national origin, but also simultaneously enabling and removing any hindrances to optimal academic outcomes. At the front line, teachers must be encouraged, empowered, and supported in promoting cultural flexibility within the classroom given that multilingualism and multiculturalism are not only increasingly related to access and power (Paris & Alim, 2014) but also simply increasing in U.S. classrooms.

## Limitations

Limitations of this study include that its sample drew only from urban African immigrants in one region of the United States. Future research could compare and contrast African immigrant student experiences in other and non-urban regions of the country. In addition, the sample drew only on nonrefugee, non-asylee populations. Given that immigrant populations that relocate not as refugees or asylees tend to be socioeconomically distinct, future research is needed to compare and contrast differences of experience in those populations relative to this study. Lastly, as with all qualitative research, the data in this study emerge out of the concrete time, space, and people involved (including the researchers themselves and the interpersonal dynamics among research stakeholders).

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