

CHAPTER 3

EDUCATING THE AFRICAN NEWCOMER STUDENT IN WESTERN NEW YORK

The Case of Sife and Multilingual Learners

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ABSTRACT

The education of refugee and immigrant students is complex due to various factors that are critical and sometimes competing. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a forum through which scholars from several African nations can discuss key issues surrounding the African refugee and immigrant new-

comer student within a historical perspective of the contemporary migration of Africans. This chapter explains the pull and push factors, and examines the nature of challenges and their impact on the overall educational experiences of the African immigrant and refugee children (and their families) in the Western New York region with emphasis on: a) historical perspective of the contemporary migration of Africans, particularly for refugee and immigrant children, b) the complexities of factors in educating them, and c) the possibilities that lay ahead. Drawing from recent research, conference and workshop surveys, and data based on on-going work by the African Educational Alliance in Buffalo-New York, the authors will highlight findings and raise questions for insights into the challenges and the collaborative effort to support the African child's education. The discussion draws from in-depth interviews, document analysis, and critical personal narratives.

The education of refugee and immigrant students is complex due to various factors that are critical and sometimes competing. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss key issues in the education of the African child in the United States, notably in Western New York within the historical and theoretical perspectives of the contemporary migration of Africans. This chapter examines the pull and push factors contributing to the presence in America of Africans, describes the educational experiences of African refugee and immigrant children as they navigate the U.S educational system and pries open the challenges they face.

In the face of a ballooning immigrant population in the US, Carola Suarez-Orozco and Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco (2002) cautioned us in *Children of Immigration* that immigrant students are crossing the best of times as well as the worst. Some may get into Ivy League institutions while others may end up unschooled, in prison, or on parole. This is due to what Ogbu and Simons (1998) call the “structural barriers and school factors [that] affect minority school performance . . .” This chapter focuses on: a) the historical and theoretical perspectives of the contemporary migration of Africans, b) the complexities of factors affecting the African refugee and immigrant student's education and c) the possibilities that lie ahead.

HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE CONTEMPORARY MIGRATION OF AFRICANS

If the antelope is wandering, it is because his home is flooded

—African Proverb—Mali

In his keynote address at the Western New York Conference on Educating the African Child, Mandala (2004) states that “any satisfactory answer to

the question why Africans are here must, in one way or another, retrace the historic connections between Africa and the Americas” (p. 4). According to him, three major phases characterize the emigration of Africans to the U. S: the era of the slave trade (early 16th–19th centuries), the colonial period in Africa (late 19th century–World War II), and the contemporary post-colonial period (World War II–present). In discussing the crises and challenges facing the African continent throughout these periods, Mandala (2004) posits that “the resulting poverty, famines, and political disorder have sent a new wave of migrants and refugees out of the continent” (p. 7). In his view, that is how Africa’s crises and challenges have become America’s crises and challenges.

According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration statistics, out of the ceiling set at 70,000 for the year 2004 admission to U. S. not including the reserve which was 20,000, the Africans comprised 25,000 (50%) compared to the following regions: Europe and Central Asia 13,000, East Asia 6,500, Near East/South East Asia 2,000 and Latin America/Caribbean 3,500. The 60,269 immigrants admitted into the U.S. in 2002 included: 8,291 Nigerians, 7,574 Ethiopians, 4,537 Somalis, 4,256 Ghanaians, and 3,207 Kenyans—a total of 27,865 (New York Times, February 21, 2005).

As a result, most African students in the U.S. public and private schools today are African refugee and immigrant children. They represent enormous racial, ethnic, geographic, linguistic, socio-economic, educational, and experiential diversities. In terms of the educational diversity inherent in population of African refugees and immigrants some of those who are classified as students have strong academic language and content knowledge in their native language. They have had adequate formal education in their own countries. Others have limited language and academic skills. Their formal education has been interrupted and/or they are long term language learners who might also have multiple problems including learning difficulty and adaptation problem. As refugee/immigrant student population in the U.S., Africans constitute a unique minority population that faces a unique set of challenges in schools.

The theoretical framework for understanding minority education draws insights from Ogbu’s cultural—ecological theory of minority school performance, which sets out to unpack “. . . the broad societal and school factors as well as the dynamics within the minority communities. Ecology is the ‘setting’, ‘environment’, or ‘world’ of people (minorities), and ‘culture, broadly, refers to the way people (in this case the minorities) see the world and behave in it” (p. 158). Further elaborating on his notion, he defines his theory as “. . . the way the minorities are treated or mistreated in education in terms of educational policies, pedagogy, and returns for their investment or school credentials” (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 158).

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this study include six African high school students from a public high school and K–12 teachers in Buffalo, New York. All the students interviewed live in the city, which speaks volumes to their socioeconomic location in the American social structure. The two females in the study were Karija, a seventeen-year old girl from Sierra-Leone, and Fanny, a twenty-year old girl from Togo. Before coming to America, they respectively spent one year in Nigeria and in Benin. As for the boys, Lumumba is a Rwanda-born but was taken to Zaire when he was just four; his parents fled the civil war that broke out in 1990. He was 20 at the time. Presently he claims the Zairean nationality, having even fought the Banyamulengue, the Rwandese troops that invaded Zaire in 1998, as a child-soldier. He came to America after being demobilized from the army. Thomas, 19, Fanny's brother, came to America along with their family. As for John, 15, he was the youngest of the group and is from Sudan. He spent one year in Egypt. Nguema, 16, a Rwandese who recently came to America in December 2002, was struggling to express himself both in French and in English. He had a little education in his country and the family was forced to flee the country to Uganda. It was the most challenging interview because of the language difficulty. Most of these young people immigrated to America with their families (father, mother, and brothers and sisters) with the exception of Lumumba who came here with his mother and brothers and sisters. The whereabouts of the father and one brother are as yet unknown because of the war.

K–12 teachers completed the teacher questionnaire based on their experience of an increasing number of African newcomer students in various Buffalo Public Schools. The sample of teachers came from various schools. Their perspectives represent their needs, concerns, and challenges in educating the African newcomer as well as their suggestions of what districts can do to better meet the needs of African students.

Data Sources

Sources besides the student interviews and teacher survey include workshop and conference documents as well as work by the African Educational Alliance of Western New York (AEA). Several workshops are held all year long by staff of Erie 1 BOCES-BETAC which also organized the first Conference on Educating the African Child in Western New York in 2004. The conference was very significant in generating invaluable data during its break up sessions which involved parents, students, and educators' forums; thus

enabling them to discuss critical educational questions and generate various group responses. Together with the survey these responses shed light into various stakeholders' needs and helped design workshops accordingly.

The Alliance is an organization created as the result of the Buffalo 2004 Conference on Educating the African Child. Its mission is to promote cultural awareness and knowledge among educators, parents, students, and community members, to help enhance the social development and academic achievement of the African child. The organization's insights into the subject of this chapter is significant as the co-authors are members of the organization and also presented together at similar conferences in the Western New York Region including Rochester, and Syracuse, New York in 2005. AEA also participates in workshops in both public and private schools where there is a significant population of African students.

Instruments

The interview questionnaire was designed to examine the participants' educational experiences in public schools in Western New York. Teachers completed the survey questionnaire consisting of the following open-ended questions: a) what are the concerns/problems/needs all educators have in teaching students from Africa? b) What can districts do to better meet the needs of African students? c) How can school personnel develop more productive relationships with African families and communities? This questionnaire served two purposes: needs assessments with suggestions for improvement as well as success indicators on the one hand; and on the other hand, it helps design a series of workshops that support teachers in understanding and addressing various cultural, behavioral, and academic issues within this population of students.

Procedure

All the interviews were conducted in English, sometimes interspersed with French, when the students could not find the right word or expression. They were tape-recorded, then transcribed. The transcript was worked out into categories and emergent themes. For anonymity's sake the name of the high school has not been revealed and the participants have been given pseudonyms. Each interview in the school took approximately one hour and the students were highly enthusiastic to narrate their lives. K-12 teachers in Buffalo Public Schools were surveyed because they teach in schools that experience an increasing number of African students. Participants' responses provided the topics for this discussion.

Data Analysis

The interview data of the students collected were entirely transcribed. Before proceeding with the transcription, we listened to the tapes several times to make sure that we did not miss any subtlety. Then, the whole passage was annotations were made on the margins. According to Marshall and Rossman (1995), “Reading, reading, and reading once more through the data forces the researcher to become familiar with those data in intimate ways. People, events, and quotes sift constantly through the researcher’s mind” (p. 113). The annotations made on the margin were later collapsed into categories. The categories were further grouped together to form emergent themes. Weis and Fine (2000) made the point that “it is impossible to analyze systematically thousands of pages of field notes or interview transcripts without coding. Once all data is examined in this way, the categories are recombined by the investigators in order to produce the written research product” (p. 30).

It is also true that the analysis of the data did not start at the end of the interviews. They were taking place simultaneously. This helped us to hone questions that were left in suspense in the previous interviews. We could already see provisional themes rising even before we were in the middle of the interviews. It is due to our contextual understanding of the lives of these students. We had the sense that what the students were telling us was grounded in their past lives in Africa. Nothing was overstretched because, as Africans we easily understand the trauma left in them in the wake of wars, political violence, and inhuman hardships that we are all familiar with either directly or because they took place not very far from our countries or cities. This allowed us to give credence to the students’ stories, and we must admit that we highly empathize with them. Our knowledge of the African geography, history and culture was with no doubt instrumental in making sense of the data. We used the method of narrative analysis as suggested by Riessman (1993) to interpret students’ views. He warns, though, that all interviews do not consist of stories. But she encourages us to pay particular attention to the narrative of the interviewee as it signals where there has been a breach between self and reality. So when the students chose to tell us a story at a particular juncture, we intuited that the experience had marked them in special ways. Stories in the interviews are the best moments to delve into the psyche of the African students.

The teachers’ responses to four basic survey questions on the other hand, have served to confirm various accounts of concerns and benefits by students interviewed or parents who participated in several workshops. This is due to the fact that these educators are experiencing an increasing number of African newcomer students. They, therefore, witness the challenges as well as some success stories of newcomers in the schools and classrooms.

Data from the conference proceedings and the continued work of the AEA constitute additional information that helped contextualize and support this discussion. The topics discussed in this chapter thus constitute major themes that emerged from these data. Three major categories emerged from the data, which consist of structural, socio-cultural, and academic challenges thus, constituting the complexities of factors impacting the African refugee and immigrant student's education.

THE COMPLEXITIES

Some faces of contemporary immigration in Western New York are African and statistics seem to support this argument. Most refugees admitted to the United States from Africa originate from 14 countries with the top six being Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo/former Zaire, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone (Zehr, 2001). Statistics also seem to indicate that thanks in part to strong advocacy from the Congressional Black Caucus, the U.S. Department of State has nearly tripled the number of refugees the United States accepts from Africa over the past seven years. Zehr (2001) states "a new wave of refugees from Africa—including many students who have had little or no education—poses a challenge for programs" (p. 1). The challenges facing the African child in his or her host community are multifaceted. They are structural, socio-cultural, linguistic, and economic. They are also specific to students and their families.

Socio-Economic and Cultural Factors: Refugee and Immigrant Families

Zehr (2001) in her article explains that, "...once in the United States, many families move to places perceived to provide 'affordable housing, better jobs, and a more tolerant atmosphere'" (p. 2). It is a difficult process for these families to establish a stable family and community lives. Andrew Duffy, in the Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy (2003) reports on the huge needs of ethnic enclaves. Echoing him, an assistant superintendent had this to share:

We end up feeding people. We end up trying to link up social services; we end up dealing with families who have been kicked out of a place because they haven't paid the rent for three months; we deal with family turmoil; we deal with the teenage sister who has now gone hooking; we deal with the drug consequences. We can't help the kid have a good, productive educational experience unless we help some of the things that surround the kid. It's not our work to get involved with the family, but on the other hand, how do you

not deal with the family issues if they're affecting the kids' performance in school? (p.2)

Although this may not be a general situation in all refugee and immigrant families, many experience hardships at various levels. The host communities, schools, and teachers' understanding of, and assistance to families and children in easing their transition at arrival become so crucial. In this study, Hassan, a Somali refugee lives a typical refugee life like many of his counterparts. He fled Somalia to Mombasa in Kenya where he lived a difficult life before moving to Buffalo:

When he arrived in here, Hassan spoke no English, had no belongings besides the clothes he was wearing and his five children to care for (Koch, 2006, p. 1). Because of his little educational background, he seems to be locked into low-income jobs and is on welfare.

He worked several entry-level jobs to support his family (since he didn't speak English), before settling for several years on dishwashing on Tandoori's in Williamsville. His daughter is married and going to EEC [*Erie Community College*], his oldest stepson finishing up at UB [*University of Buffalo*]. (Koch, 2006, p. 4)

African parents strongly want their children to seize opportunities the system offers them and know full well that they are the gatekeepers to their children's future and the children in return give their parents credit for that. During an African (Somali-Bantu) parents orientation session on special education at a high school, one parent expressed a concern among others in these words "I want my son to study hard despite the language barriers and cultural differences...I told him that the American culture is not on the street, it is in the home..." This particular father's concerns were echoed by all parents present at the workshop as they express their powerlessness watching their children's inappropriate behaviors, by their African standards. For instance, many expressed their strong disapproval of their children's dress code, use of street language, behavior problems in class, lack of academic motivation in some cases. The teachers in this study are also afraid African newcomer students "pick up bad negative and unhealthy behaviors from peers." In addition, they are also concerned that "difficulty communicating with families increased academic tension."

These families share in common difficult socio-economic conditions with very low and unstable jobs such as janitors, house-cleaners, etc. Yet, most of them held middle-class positions in their respective countries. Only Karija's mother has been able to retrain herself as an assistant nurse. It is not rare that the families live on one income except for the part-time-jobs held by the children. This is certainly not without consequences on their lives and education.

Although it is not uncommon to think that most Africans are multilingual, and multicultural with ‘a triple heritage’ (Mazrui, 1986), many refugee children may not be fluent in their own official language. The lack of fluency in English which constitutes a major obstacle for parents is equally challenging the children in the educational system. Teachers, parents and students experience some difficult academic situations while community organizations such as the AEA raise critical questions around the effectiveness of the new English Language Learner policy as it applies to Buffalo Public Schools. In our conference presentations we argue that the case of the African student requires a program that ensures fluency in English for his success as a multilingual student.

Systemic Issues: State Policy and School Factors

The school system as a whole reflects the mainstream culture in its curriculum content, language of instruction, and pedagogical practices, which the newcomer student in general and the African student in particular need to understand and quickly adjust to. This process of adjustment constitutes a major challenge to the African newcomer who has to come to terms with issues of survival and identity formation. This is not necessarily painless as the American educational system is totally different from the educational system (itself a colonial legacy) in their native countries in Africa. This comes as no surprise.

Minority students and schooling in America is a recurrent theme in the literature. Ogbu has worked for nearly three decades on African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics as involuntary minorities who have been forced into belonging to the American society, are the voluntary minorities who emigrated to America of their own free will. They hope to improve their socio-economic conditions or are simply running away from political or religious oppressions.

Building on this seminal work, many other researchers have leaned on the question of voluntary students and school achievement. Suarez-Orozco(1987) finds that:

... the data already available tend to support Ogbu’s contention... that overall immigrant minorities, such as Hispanics of Central and South American origin in the United States, generally perform better in schools and certainly experience different kinds of problems than the caste-like minorities, such as blacks, Mexican-Americans, and Native Americans. (p. 288)

For most African refugee and immigrant newcomer students, the academic curriculum and instructional design of the regular classrooms do not meet their needs. The rigorous academic and linguistic demands of regular

classrooms also place serious obstacles on their learning. As a result, their prior knowledge and other strengths that they brought with them remain untapped in the classrooms and the students become at risk of failure.

Student Factors: Personal, Academic, Social Behaviors, Strengths and Needs

Zehr's (2001) description of students fits the case of many African newcomers as

...refugees of civil war between tribal [sic] groups that erupted in their country...and continues today. Some of them have witnessed fighting firsthand and lost close family members to the ravages of war, others were forced to flee their homeland and live in crowded refugee camps...or on the fringes of African cities, often for years...education is pretty limited and for cultural reasons, girls attend schools less than boys,... some children don't go to school because they are hungry; they suffer hunger-induced headaches and find it hard to concentrate on class work. (p. 1)

It is from such circumstances that many are often extracted by refugee organizations for relocation in new host communities throughout the world. Zehr (2001) further shares that:

...many never became literate in their own tongue...[they] have academic as well as language barriers...they come here—and it may be the first time they think of schools as a building. They've never stood in a lunch line. They have never had to return a library book. (p. 2)

For many of these students the notions of structure, high expectations and approach to classroom management need to be reexamined by their teachers who may not be aware that their students' most basic physiological needs are hardly met. The teachers' response to the question about the concerns, problems, and needs all educators have in teaching student from Africa seems to confirm the above arguments:

Some lack appropriate clothing and have no life skills. They have no socialization...have problem using bathroom, poor hygiene. They can't speak read and write. They are not used to structured environment. More staff and materials are needed to support them with extra one-on-one help.

Many African students, however, find solace in their teachers who are basically dedicated to their education. For students who arrived in America practically without any grounding in English their academic performance is a real

tour de force. They are deeply indebted to their teachers, especially the ESL teachers who go out of their way to equip them with this basic tool for functioning in the American society. They articulate that point very well.

Interviewer: So, you said that you don't have any problem in this school.

Thomas: No, not really. At the beginning I have a problem. In my way it was a difficult problem. I didn't know any English when I came to the school. Everything was like watching a movie or something to me in the first year . . .

Interviewer: So, language was a real handicap to you. How did you manage to overcome that handicap?

Thomas: Yes, yes. The teachers are always . . . you are always welcome here you know, to get extra help as you need it. I like the school because we have different cultures and they have different classes and they have ESL classes and with the ESL classes, that's how I get better every year that I am here.

All things being equal, the guidance counselors, also in the good books of these students, contribute the best they can to the nurturing spirit of the group of adults who make the learning experience a memorable one in the high school. They assist the students in every step of their schooling. Crucial in these steps is the selection of subjects. In the main, they do their job so well that some have gone beyond the purview of their professional responsibility to reach the stature of confidants or confidantes. I will never forget many teachers attended a workshop one winter cold Buffalo Saturday morning to learn more about the African children, where they met parents and children alike. The kind of enriched, privileged relationship that exists between Fanny and her guidance counselor is a case in point as she shares "the guiding counselor is really my best friend. I tell her all my problems, even out of school problems. And she keeps them confidential. She doesn't tell anybody. I respect her."

Generally the African students in this study seem to get on well with all their teachers because, to give credence to their voices, they value education. But the degree of commitment to a teacher tallies with the college plans of each one of them. Depending on the major one wants to embrace in college, they will show a differing degree of ownership of the subjects and this impacts the relations with the teacher teaching the subject matter. Lumumba clearly explains his dislike of biology:

I have nothing to do with biology. I want to know the course and pass it. That's it. And forget about it. If I wanted to be a biologist then my main focus would

be in biology. I've nothing to do with biology. Just like what I did with earth science. I focused on earth science, passed it, and never mind.

This is certainly why Lumumba does not get on well with the biology teacher. Even if the working climate is generally very good between the African students and their teachers, the classroom like any living organism, sometimes experiences little frictions that are not strong enough to mar the overall convivial atmosphere. Fanny was obliged to revise her college plans because of the math teacher's behavior that she could not stand. Her math teacher was trying to "give" her "an attitude" she says hence, her decision to drop the math class she registered for:

I was taking math; I really don't have to take it. But it will help me to get into college, in the AP calculus. I was taking it but every time my teacher gave me homework I tried to do my best but my teacher keep saying I don't work and stuff like that. And one day I came to school and he was trying to give me an attitude. I got mad and went to see my guiding counselor to tell her I wanna drop the class. She change [sic] it for me. I did not want to drop it but I did not like in the first period to come early in the morning and somebody give me a hard time and I have a bad day like all day long, no, that's why I change it but I had no choice.

The High School provides a nurturing academic home for the African students. All of the students interviewed relish the international character of the school which is made up of several nationalities. They are happy to learn different cultures and religions of the world. Maybe, because of so many nationalities, they are able to also connect to each other around soccer as the dominant spirit of the school. The school cultivates pride from beating the topnotch schools in Buffalo such as Future Best and Millennium Technology, also pseudonyms. Because soccer is not well developed in America but is the first sport in many developing countries, the high school, with regard to its international flavor, is in a position to defy elite college preparatory schools. This school spirit, even if it is not the sole factor, remains a fountain well where the African students draw their stamina to pad their self-esteem and forge ahead in their academic endeavor.

These students are all very ambitious and plan on going to college, exhibiting a positive self-concept. They perceive themselves as hardworking, serious, academically strong and think that this is the image reflected by their teachers.

Interviewer: How would your classmates find you?

Thomas: I think they will find that I am hardworking, serious and will succeed.

In terms of the notion of self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992) it is very important for their school outcomes. They do not want to end up with jobs like those of their parents. They all dream of white collar jobs, high-paying jobs, and prestigious jobs.

Interviewer: What do you want to become later on?

Fanny: I wanted to become a pilot but with what happened with 9/11, I change my mind. I want to become an accountant.

After the 9/11 tragedy, several pilots lost their jobs. That led Fanny to revise her future plans. Even Nguema, who arrived in December 2002 and whose English is still poor, dreams of entering a college and become an important person and share fully in the American dream by becoming what he calls “a Yousa man” (meaning a man from the USA, an American. Because of his French interference, USA becomes Youza). He does not know exactly what profession he will embrace but he certainly wants to be a very important person in society. He understands intuitively that one’s occupational status is essentially mediated by education.

Interviewer: Why do you want to go to the university?

Nguema: I want to join some of the people who have like the PhD.

In light of The New York State regulations deemed to be above the ability of the immigrant and refugee newcomer, students like Nguema will more likely scale down their ambitions for now. It is a difficult policy whose implementation is more likely to leave many newcomers behind unless the resources are actively mobilized and the pedagogies are genuinely inclusive and culturally responsive.

Suarez-Orozco (1987) argued that the new arrivals were “desirable students” (p. 289) because of their deportment and engagement with school work. For example, Suarez-Orozco (1987) found that Central American students are particularly motivated to learn English. More still, they are perceived to be “nicer to have around.” Their positive attitude to work, coupled with high discipline and a sense of purpose adumbrate good morrows. As a matter of fact, education is paramount to all of them and one is astonished to hear these adolescents uncritically endorse the American dream without certainly being cognizant of the theoretical underpinnings surrounding the issue. From their empirical approach, they believe that education is the lever in people’s social mobility and that without credentials one is nailed down to the bottom rail of society.

Despite these highly ambitious dreams and appreciative expressions of their academic experiences, African students equally face difficulties related to personal and social behaviors in terms of perceptions of peers’

behaviors, their own behavioral excesses, and peer rejection. Karija, who is bullied by African American female students, has made it a vow not to fight again. She wants to become a medical doctor and will not allow peers to jettison such a rosy future.

Interviewer: Now, what are your relations with the other girls?

Karija: No, my relationship is just the same. Even if they say something, I just ignore them and go because they already told me if I fight again they gonna drive me out of school, so (passionately) I don't wanna be like this. This is my last year and I don't wanna be like this. I wanna graduate. I don't wanna be like this, no, I've got things to do, I've got my future, I know what I wanna become. I don't got time to fight. I am here to learn. I wanna become a doctor.

She makes a quick cost-benefit analysis. How much she is ready to forgo in terms of her ego is a function of the perceived spin-offs of her education.

All six interviewees took a dim view of the discipline in their institution. This discipline is constantly judged against what they perceive to be right or wrong, their own basic African education being the yardstick.

Interviewer: But generally speaking when you look at people from a distance, do you think that students are interested in learning?

Thomas: No, no, there are people in this school, I think; I don't know why they are coming here for. Because the behaviors toward the teachers . . . If, . . . I mean, according to our cultures a pupil cannot stand up against a teacher or argue with a teacher or even talk the teacher back or insult back a teacher.

The African students in this study seem to be evolving in an environment where anarchy is the rule rather than the exception, as they compare the way breach of discipline is dealt with here with approaches to addressing discipline issues in African schools. Very nuanced in their answers, they maintain that they are very grateful to the school, but that "they are happy, not proud of it", which is not very complimentary, to say the least. Because of too many 'stuffs' happening in the school, Karija voices her mixed opinions about it saying "yes, I am happy to be in this school. I am really happy. But I am not proud to be. I am not proud to be in this school but I am happy to be in school."

The high school that they attend is an urban school with the stigma attached to that type of schools in the American educational landscape.

These African students disapprove of the lack of discipline that is eating into the fabric of their school and are very articulate about it. They do not hesitate to take the administration to task for its seeming inertia in the face of a growing tide of violence. . . . “I don’t think that the principal is even doing anything about it. No, he is not. I think he should try to do something about that” says Karija, with a tinge of imploration in the tone. Even when the administration tries to punish a “troublemaker”, “here the only punishment is they send them to a room and make them sit down for a whole day or make them study. It is never that tough”, admits Thomas. Recalling the authoritarian type of punishment that still prevails in many African schools, Lumumba thinks that cases of disruptive behavior would have been simply meted out with corporal punishment back in Africa and only regrets that such a disciplinary approach to behavior management cannot be used in the USA to set the record straight. “Here it isn’t the case. You just have to make a phone call and they will take him away. The next day he is free to do the same.”

As a matter of fact, gangs are reported to impinge on the school experience of the students.

Interviewer: But once in school, do they [the students] stick out in groups?

Lumumba: Yes, they organize in groups. Even Mclash, Soft Tornado, Never listen. They don’t like to learn . . .

African students, without knowing it, end up in the process of othering as they shut themselves up in the “they versus we” dichotomy. There is a world of difference between the “they” of the American students who “organize in groups” certainly for mischievous scheming, who “don’t listen” and the implicit “we-ness” of the African students. The picture is drawn in a black and white fashion, strongly reminiscent of a Manichean division of the small world of these adolescents. This is evidenced by the watertight delineation of groups that would allow for no intrusion. If fights between these groups are rife, John, the Sudanese student thinks that it is due to the fact that sometimes there is an attempt at border-crossing, severely countered with border patrolling. It simply amounts to the violation of a sovereign territory, a more than enough *casus belli*.

Interviewer: Do the members of different groups get along?

John: Hummm, sometimes they fight, sometimes they don’t.

This differential trajectory would make the new arrivals ‘desirable students’ (Suarez-Orozco, 1987, p. 289). Suarez-Orozco found that Central American students were particularly motivated to learn English. More still,

they are perceived to be ‘nicer to have around’. Their positive attitude to work, coupled with high discipline and a sense of purpose adumbrate good morrows. Actually, as Suarez- Orozco(1987) has shown:

Because in most cases they had escaped their country in search of a better tomorrow and because their parents sacrificed a great deal for the journey to North America, recent immigrant students thought the advantages in the new land were self-evident and required little elaboration. (p. 290)

It is fairly observed that peer rejection is a reality that many African students experience. The teachers in the survey observe their “isolation from other student.”

Interviewer: Why are they fighting?

J: They don’t want you in the groups and they start fighting.

Interviewer: But if you belong to a group, can you go to another group, too?

J: No, they won’t accept you. They will fight you.

To take the land back so to speak, they resort to pitched battles, each group being imbued with its righteousness. In such a volatile climate, many African students find it difficult to build quality relationships with their American counterparts, especially their brothers and sisters, the African Americans. Of course, many of them do have friends but they are very careful with whom they interact with because they are in search of ‘trust friends, not friends who will put you in trouble’ to echo Lumumba’s prudence.

The Africans have suffered enough from antagonistic confrontations from their peers. Ironically enough, the most powerful hostility comes from the Black American students. There seems to be no love lost between these two communities. Fanny, the Togolese female student, vents her fear of the Black Americans.

Interviewer: Why are you afraid of the Black Americans?

Fanny: I think, some of them are violent, you know, and they are troublemakers. I do not want to be in trouble... One day, one of the black boy [the process of othering is still at work. She assumes the posture of a non-black] pushed my sister in her locker and she fell down. And sometime if you try to befriend them they try to get you in trouble.

She also finds that they are not trustworthy, “it might be locker problem. Like you need help and call them to show you how to open your locker combination, one day, two days they will come steal your stuff.” Although

she has personally not been victim of such treacherous practices, she believes firmly that this is true. “No, it did not happen to me. I see friends talk about it.” Fanny’s defiance of the African American students seems to have been built up from a long-standing hostility between the two groups who are close by the skin color but torn adrift by different cultural perceptions.

Interviewer: And do you interact among the groups?

Fanny: It depends. Sometime, black people, they do not want to see us. They do not, hmm . . . want to see African people and there is a kind of racism [sic] and something like that. So, they talk bad about other people.

Interviewer: What do they say about you?

Fanny: Hmm, they say that we African people, we live in jungles, stuff like that, you know . . .”

Lumumba definitely is not accustomed to looking for a nice form to convey his thought, a frame of mind perhaps contracted through being drafted in the army as a child-soldier when he was just 13.

Interviewer: Can you talk about your relations with the Black Americans?

Lumumba: Ah! The Black Americans are very complicated people. Oh, my God . . . They don’t speak polite English, and they use that English with anybody.

Interviewer: You are all black. Do you get along?

Lumumba: They are not very racist toward us. But those Africans who choose to go along with them, smoke wee [weed] outside, hang around in the street they get along. They have a good relationship. That’s what they want. If you choose to smoke wee with them you’re fine. And if you choose not to, you should stay home.

Lumumba’s perspective is echoed by teachers and principals alike who during meetings and workshops express their deep surprise and concerns about the fact that many Africans and African American students do not seem to get along well. The same type of conflicts is also observed between Africans and Hispanic students. Furthermore, during a workshop an African father agreed with all the attendants that African children are picking up bad behaviors and the street culture and shared that he sternly told his son that the American culture is not on the street, it is in the home.

The guerrilla warfare between the Africans and the African Americans reaches its fever peak among the female students. The following vignette

epitomizes the different tensions, the war of attrition that predominates in the relations between the Africans and the African Americans:

I was going to the gym, and my sister and my cousin were going to lunch. And these girls came to her and they were saying some stuff to my cousin. I told my cousin to ignore them. My cousin said yes, that's what I've got to do, I am gonna ignore them because they are fools, you know, and one of the girls came up to my cousin and asked: "Are you talking to me?" And my cousin was like, "well, whosoever is saying whatever they're saying is the person I am talking to". Then the girl was like, well it's me. And they started fightin . . . And my cousin was asked to leave the school.

Clearly, discipline is a serious issue at the high school though other schools experience the same problems to the greatest bitterness of the African students who are shocked by a school culture that they must learn to live with. The discipline that cries for a serious remedy is profoundly troubling to many African refugee students whose past lives are already traumatized by wars, violence, and abuse. For many, some classroom rules and expectations are already difficult to follow due to some psychological issues that are not understood and culturally addressed.

The students in this study are equally very critical of some African students who once here try to "play cool", to buy into the American popular culture instead of dedicating themselves to their studies. This is a real phenomenon, which teachers, administrators, and parents regrettably observe as the newly acquired estion by urging their African peers to "remember where you came from, African students are trying American behaviors that are not positive" (Erie I BOCES/BETAC, 2004, p. 19).

School is not a solitary journey for the African students. "...Ogbu has always said that 'community forces' constitute one of two sets of factors influencing minority school performance" (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 155).

Most of the African students' time is devoted to their education. This already positive attitude to school is reinforced by a family environment that is conducive to academic progress. Discipline is still rigorous in their families although the parents associate to it a profound sense of responsibility and trust. The parents are interested in what their children are doing in school even when very often they themselves do not speak English. That is the case of Thomas's father who uses French to tutor his children at home. He is not literate in English but because he is a university graduate, he is able to explain many of the lessons. As for Karija, her parents are so worried about her falling behind with her homework that she sometimes feels that it is too much.

Sometimes, I think they are giving me a hard time. Because if I come back from school and I don't wanna read, I am tired they will be like you need to

read, they will be yelling at you, you have to come and sit in front of them and read and after you've got to explain to them, I always feel like, oh, my God, these people are too much, I can't do this. So, I always think they don't like me. But sometimes I think ah, they really want the best for me.

Overall, there seems to be an acceptance of the parents' involvement in their children's studies. They project the best for them. They understand that if they cannot get good jobs in the American society it is because they do not have the necessary cultural capital-mainly the American credentials in order to take fully advantage of the system- that could be converted into economic advantages (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970).

So, the problem created by indiscipline is quickly offset by the gains reaped in the field of the command of the English language. They know that it would have been a very different story, were they to attend another school. Karija, despite the fact that she was the most vocal in deprecating the discipline in the school, is well aware of the opportunities in the High School. They are nowhere to be found in many other schools:

Interviewer: What is your general impression of the school?

Karija: [*brightening up*] Hummm, there are a lot of things going on in this school. Like ESL. There are a lot of schools which don't teach ESL to foreign students and there are a lot of opportunities in this school than in others.

Despite all the resentment she bears about the school in other areas, she shows a clairvoyance pointing to the fact the high school might be a necessary evil for African students like them who still need to be groomed in their English language in special classes. We believe that this argument weighs heavy in the balance and determines why most of them feel so affectively close to their ESL teachers to the point of veneration. Fanny takes English very seriously because "I never speak it before and in this country English is the first language here and everybody speak, they need it everywhere, in school, job, everywhere, that's why."

English here plays the dual role as an integrative as well as an instrumental key and its importance cannot be overemphasized. Integrative because "... they need it everywhere, in school, job, everywhere..." As long as the African students are in America, they will need it in order to function in society and have a sense of belonging. Instrumental because it is part of the fundamentals in any breadwinning process in America. The ESL teacher who must induce them to the secrets of the language takes on a particular importance, an importance that signals the master- neophyte relationship in initiation circles.

POSSIBILITIES: REBUILDING LIVES THROUGH EDUCATION

School-Community Partnerships: Good Leadership Matters at all Levels

Beyond all the complexities, there are possibilities for African immigrants and refugees in the U. S. to grow and lead prosperous lives. The involvement and leadership of various stakeholders is crucial and will make a difference. To assist in addressing some of these issues, educational authorities continue to express their commitment. Teachers in various ways show support and assist in the classroom and outside by attending workshops in cold winter weekends. For instance, teachers surveyed realize that a major obstacle is students' non-familiarity with the American and the school cultures. They also expressed the need to "establish contact with families through case workers." They further believe that African newcomer students "need some time to be acclimated to school setting before school placement."

Refugee Resettlement Agencies and Organizations such as Catholic Charities, the International Institute, and Journey's End Refugee Services and Jewish Family Services in the community are involved in educating parents through workshops and assisting the children. For instance, the Parent Network of Western New York recently held a workshop for African parents in one of the high schools to inform them of their children's rights to special services as well as procedures to obtain them. The African Educational Alliance of Western New York established just a year ago focuses primarily on the education of the African child and seeks to build bridges of cultural understanding amongst the stakeholders through collaborative efforts with school principals, teachers, and various offices . . . by reaching out to parents and building alliances with other community organizations. The partnership approach to supporting the African refugee immigrant student paves the way to promoting strategies that advance academic achievement of African students.

Classroom Instruction: Toward Culturally Responsive Pedagogical Practices

There is a need for schools and teachers to implement effective strategies in educating refugee and immigrant students. School districts need to be selective in the recruitment of their administrators, instructional personnel, paraprofessional support staff, and guidance counselors. Until the system provides specific staff training related to the newcomer issues to meet the students' cognitive, linguistic, academic, and emotional needs on an

on-going basis, newcomer refugee and immigrant students will remain at-risk of achieving academic excellence.

Despite our credentials and qualifications as teachers, research shows that a major challenge in teaching in a pluralistic society today is the ability to make schools, curriculum and pedagogy responsive to the needs, and interests of an increasingly diverse body of students. The literature in human diversity in education and culturally responsive pedagogy suggests that the teaching body which is mostly monocultural and monolingual needs to adjust its instructional approaches to diverse students (Cushner, McClelland & Safford, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Banks & Banks, 2001; Irvine & Armento, 2001). In answer to the question “what can the districts do to better meet the needs of African students?” the teachers indicate that there is a need for a “mandated staff development for the whole schools and more teachers.” They further pointed to the need of ‘bridging the gap’ of knowledge on how African students learn acknowledging that “resources are not addressing the needs of teachers, students and other support staff . . . educators need to know more about their students and the majority of material is not relevant.” The needs of ELL population in general and the African students in particular are so high that educational authorities see the importance of creating a newcomer center.

An International Newcomer Program

An important suggestion in addressing the unique needs of the ELL (English Language Learner) population in general and SIFE (Students with Interrupted Formal Education) students in particular in the Buffalo School District is the creation of an international newcomer center where needed resources could be centralized to serve this high needs population better. According to Boyson and Short (2003), newcomer students with limited literacy in any language and limited formal education represent a great need in the U.S. educational system. The current reforms that call for testing all students the first year they are in the United States is particularly difficult for the type of newcomer students served. Nonetheless, through newcomer programs, students will have better access to the educational system and better opportunities for future accomplishments. The African Educational Alliance of WNY in partnership with other institutions and stakeholders propose the creation of an international newcomer center that effectively and holistically addresses the needs of newcomer refugee and immigrant students.

During the Grover Cleveland High School Community Meeting of August 21, 2007, both the Superintendent and the Associate Superintendent shared information on piloting high school newcomer centers in three dif-

ferent high schools, in three years with eight ‘feeder schools’ beginning with Grover Cleveland in 2007–2008. The Superintendent informed the community of the District’s five goals with the fifth which seeks to “decrease the disproportional identification of African American and English language learner students for special education.” The program consists of “intensive ESL, small group instruction, sheltered instruction in content areas, frequent progress monitoring, credits for ESL and native language and gradual integration into mainstream.” The model also includes professional development on:

Sheltered instruction for ESL mainstream teachers, regularly scheduled team planning and collegial sharing, literacy coach trained in second language acquisition theory and sheltered instruction, multilingual department support-ESL support teacher, SIFE support teacher and program supervisors/director.

Additional resources in place and needed ones are identified and extended learning opportunities will help accommodate needs.

CONCLUSION

As members of the African Educational Alliance, we are confident that despite the challenges faced by the African children through their personal, academic and cultural experiences, they are an asset to their new classroom, school, and community. Most of them are multilingual and multicultural. Their heritage has enabled them to engage with diversity and they know that they need to adjust. We can all assist the African child and his or her family in rebuilding their lives and making the academic, psychological, socio-cultural and economic adjustments necessary to prevent a loss of human capital. It is our responsibility as educators to pursue culturally responsive practices by making the curriculum relevant and adjusting our instructional approaches to serve all our students. It is equally important to assess our personal and professional dispositions towards diverse learners. Classroom management can no longer be one way, about correcting students’ behaviors; it is also about understanding how one’s personal and professional dispositions toward diversity affect student motivation and overall behavior. Aspects such as content and pedagogical knowledge and teacher dispositions are intertwined and constitute the essential elements for teacher effectiveness.

Yet, to sustain best practices we would like to emphasize the essential role leadership involvement plays. Principals and superintendents as instructional leaders supported by a committed school Board will establish, sustain and support a school and classroom environment that motivate teachers

and students to perform successfully. With a strong focus on instructional and pedagogical knowledge teachers are empowered to not only know their subject matter but also the multicultural content. Thus, positioning themselves to better know their students; acquire research-based pedagogical practices and develop a reflective practice that helps address academic deficits, cultural dissonance; and implement culturally responsive classroom management techniques

Charting the complexity of the African refugee and immigrant experiences critically, this discussion equally presents the real possibilities for transforming these challenges into milestones for the African children to see their dreams fully come true. It is our hope that not only will the teachers increasingly and effectively help turn the African refugee and immigrant child with traumatic experience and academic deficits into achievers, but also assist them in the transformation of their cultural and linguistic barriers into bridges for success. It is about recognizing and unlocking their gifts and talents through a variety of educational services, relevant pedagogical practices, and community support. They can dream in many languages and realize their dreams as the teacher cares, values, and nurtures each child as a unique learner with unique abilities.

The interview of African students at the high school has been an opportunity for them to discuss their school experiences and air the plan that they harbor for their future. A major concern in the stories of these children is the perceptions of African students and African Americans students of each other, perceptions in reciprocally nullifying terms. This discussion that has been opened up by the strong resentful accounts of the prevailing atmosphere between the two groups needs further investigation in order to understand the real bone of contention. We would very much like to critically understand such relentless oppositions between two people similar in so many ways and yet do not seem to overcome prejudices and stereotypes. We suggest that further research leans very critically on the ways the African and the African American students perceive each other in order to enable them to deconstruct and reconstruct their shared identities and humanity.

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