African Students in the USA: How an Unnoticed Group Beats the Odds

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During my doctoral studies at the University of Missouri, I participated in several discussions on academic performances among students of different ethnic/racial groups. While one student group was identified as the model minority, other groups received favorable reviews. But the African American/Black student group was rated the least competent in academic performance at middle and high school levels here in the United States. It was assumed that as a group of learners, they were synonymous with academic underachievement. The consensus was that they were in last place in almost everything except sports and music. The dominant narrative was that they were unable to excel in academics for reasons that were not well known. The belief emanated from the interpretation of the data available to us at the time. But the unfortunate thing was that many black students I met at a nearby urban public school district at the time bought into the narrative and consequently made little efforts to study hard and earn good grades.

The narrative was anchored in the academic results from American public schools (K-12) which showed low performance for African American students. I did not understand what the issues were at the middle and high school levels because the few African American students that I knew at the university were performing as well as students from other ethnic groups. Each time the discussion came up in class, four views usually emerged in response. One view blamed the low-performing students. Another perspective blamed the teachers and the school system. A third argument justified such low performances as acceptable results for certain students. The fourth view was a dismissal of the test results as a form of conspiracy. It was almost always a lively discussion.

While it is not a good idea to reject facts emerging from standardized test scores, it does not hurt to ask about the quality of education offered in schools that are in low-income neighborhoods. Educators understand that the educational background of disadvantaged students leaves them with less preparation for learning and academic performance. When factors such as different standards of education in urban and suburban neighborhoods are not taken into account, it sometimes gives rise to the notion that low academic achievement may be due to genetics and culture. But as educators analyze previous statistics, new information emerges on the horizon.

Unnoticed and unrecognized, recent African students are beating the odds in American public education system to become the new most educated group of immigrants in not only the United States but also Canada, Britain and the rest of the developed/industrialized world. And when an underrated group beats the odds and succeeds, questions arise regarding factors that might be responsible for the success. It is in response to such questions that I undertook a journey to find out what has made African students the new model minority as the highest educated immigrant group in the world today. Before examining the reasons for the new phenomenon, I need to define African students and explore their views about how they navigate educational terrain in a different culture.

African Students: A Definition

For the purpose of this study, African students, African-born students, or African immigrant students can be distinguished from Africans who were brought to the Americas and Europe during the transatlantic human cargo trade. While these recent immigrant learners appear physically indistinguishable from the larger African American population, they actually constitute a separate group in all other ways. Three things separate the two groups. First, there is the element of choice. African-born students are immigrants who arrived in the United States on their own volition, as opposed to those Africans who were forcibly taken away a few centuries earlier. Second, there is the fact of nativity. Recent African immigrants are African-born while contemporary African Americans are American-born. Third, there is the issue of enculturation. The African-born population in American schools was initially socialized in African cultures before emigrating to the United States while the African-American population grew up in American cultures from childhood, where they are a minority.

But, the African-born students or African immigrant students can also be divided into two groups: (1) There are those who came to America for some educational, business, governmental, nongovernmental, humanitarian, or ecclesiastical purposes; and (2) There are refugees, or those who came to the United States to escape political instability, persecution, civil unrest, or natural disaster. In other words, there are those who came for something and those who were running from something.

In general, African-born students or African immigrants are those with recent African ancestry and not the descendants of Africans who were uprooted from their homeland centuries ago. In reality, the tent of African immigrants encompasses all the types of ‘voluntary’ African-born population in America identified above as well as their descendants. Also included among Africans in the United States are those with at least one African parent. This includes Barack Obama (half Kenyan), the current president of the United States of America. However, by definition, and for the purpose of this research, *African students are immigrant learners born and socialized in Africa before arriving in the United States*.

Many educators are yet to understand that they are a distinct group of learners in view of the fact that they come from cultures that are in most cases totally different from those of the

United States. Whatever values they were socialized with in their native African cultures seem to partly remain with them in one way or another as they navigate through life in the United States. These students are to be seen as culturally different learners in their approaches and lifestyles. The distinctions stressed in this study are for educational purposes only, in relation to the topic.

African Students and American Public Schools

Public schools provide arenas for academic competition, among other activities. It is in such places that young learners develop and sharpen their skills for future pursuits. The exposure and opportunities that American schools provide have continued to attract immigrant students from every country in the world. At present, one out of four youths in the United States of America is either an immigrant or a child of an immigrant (Deparle, 2009a,b). A significant group within the foreign-born population in American public schools seems to go under the raider. The African-born students in American public schools largely go unnoticed even as they continue to grow and excel in their performances. The high academic performances of African-born students do not only exist at the elementary and secondary levels of education, but they carry over to colleges and universities. However, little is being done to track their statistics at pre-college levels.

In this research, it is discovered that few in the academy are aware of the fact that Africans possess the highest educational attainment rates compared to any immigrant groups in the United States. “Of the African-born population in the United States age 25 and older, 86.4% reported having a higher degree or higher, compared with 78.9% of Asian-born immigrants and 76.5% of European-born immigrants, respectively. These figures contrast with 61.8% of the total foreign-born population” (Dixon, 2006). In 2008, Bowling Green State University published

Kefa M. Otiso's study also showing that "African immigrants in the United States are generally more educated and earn higher salaries than immigrants from elsewhere" (Otiso 2008). Asian Nation group of scholars have also acknowledged that "immigrants from Africa actually have the highest educational achievement rates and they also have the lowest rate of having less than a high school education. African immigrants are also most likely to be in the labor market," the group concluded (Asian Nation 2012). There is little doubt that students from different African countries face different challenges with regard to language and culture, but in general, African immigrant students now sit at the top of the academic ladder.

In their report entitled "Top Colleges Take More Blacks, but Which Ones?" Sara Rimer and Karen W. Arenson (2004) observed that top universities in America have become fertile ground for African immigrants. Harvard University even revealed that two-thirds of the population of its Black students was not traditional African Americans (Rimer & Arenson, 2004). A journal underlines the new phenomenon this way:

> African immigrants to the U.S. are also more highly educated than any other native-born ethnic group including white Americans. Some 48.9 percent of all African immigrants hold a college diploma. This is slightly more than the percentage of Asian immigrants to the U.S., nearly double the rate of native-born white Americans, and nearly four times the rate of native-born African Americans (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 1999-2000).

It has also been observed that the educational achievement of black students is not restricted to one country or one region. Other nations in both the developed world and developing countries that have examined academic results from their schools have come to the same conclusion. An example is our neighbor to the north.

> In Canada, similar trends can be seen where both foreign-born and Canadian-born blacks have graduation rates that exceed those of other Canadians. Similar patterns of educational over-achievement are reached with years of schooling and with data from the 1994 Statistics Canada survey...Black immigrants have a higher standard of educational achievement, on average, than the overall Canadian population (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2007, p. 279).

Many African immigrants came to the United States as professionals and are contributing immensely to the greatness of America. They are successful in different walks of life but are sometimes not noticed. Compared to immigrants from other parts of the world, an overwhelming majority of African immigrants are fluent in the English language, and their income levels are high (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In view of their overachievement, African immigrants have recently been referred to as the new "model minority" ("Black Immigrants," 2007, p. 3).

Historically, the arrival of Africans in the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade is well documented. But what is less known are the details of the movement of the African youth since the middle of the twentieth century. In the last five decades, the number of Africans emigrating to Europe and America has dramatically increased. Reasons for the migration include educational, technological, political, and economic exchanges. Growing numbers of recently constituted African communities can now be easily spotted not only in urban and suburban areas, but in remote corners of Europe and America. Their presence in some parts of Europe has become so visible that some of them have been elected mayors and archbishops in cities with minority Black population; examples can be found in Dublin, Ireland and London. The United States began experiencing an increase in the influx of "voluntary" African immigrants (Ogbu, 1991) from the late 1950s following certain immigration arrangements that appealed to many African youth (Danzer, klor de Alva, Krieger, Wilson, & Woloch, 2005; Hine, Hine, & Harrold, 2003; Lefkowitz, 1996; Rong & Brown, 2002).

In view of this, the Black immigrant population of the United States has grown from 125,000 in 1960 to more than 2.5 million in the year 2000. African immigrants have continued to increase in large numbers almost undetected as all the attention remains on Hispanic illegal immigration. The projection is that by 2020, Black immigrants and their children will number close to 5 million, constituting about 12% of the U.S. Black population (Rong & Brown, 2002). Since 1990, over 50,000 Africans, many of them students, move to the United States annually (Chude-Sokei, 2007; Paris, 1995; Takougang, 2005). In the last three decades, more Africans have voluntarily migrated to the United States than the half million number of them that were forcibly brought during the transatlantic slave trade (Takougang, 2005).

As shown in the U.S. Census Bureau report for the year 2000, about 56 percent of all African-born immigrants came to the United States from 1990 to 2000 while the remaining percent arrived mainly in the decades just before the 1990s. More than half of all African immigrants to the United States are therefore viewed as "recent arrivals." In 2002, there were over a million African foreign born living in the United States – accounting for 3 percent of total foreign-born individuals in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). This means that over a million of the more than 35 million people lumped together as "African Americans" were born in Africa (Takougang, 2005).

How African Students are Left in Limbo

For any groups to go unnoticed, the reason may be a deliberate attempt to marginalize them or it may be as a result of some innocent oversight. In my research and experience, I did not come across any conspiracy theories in this regard. There seems to be no coordinated attempt to neglect or overlook African-born learners. American public schools are actually welcoming centers of learning. But it has yet to occur to many educators that African-born students deserve the recognition and attention that are given to other foreign-born learners. In several public schools I visited in the Midwest, I saw African-born students sitting in some classrooms with helpless feelings that they did not count. Such lack of attention to their educational needs appear to have left African immigrant students in limbo. These young Africans are therefore coping in isolation in their schools. While the current system of American education is not deliberately excluding any groups of students, I have, however, noticed various ways that African-born learners are being kept in limbo; and those ways of neglect serve as my motivation for this study.

First, I once took a class at a university where the professor devoted some time to discussing the important topic of the presence, locations, and contributions of recent immigrants from the different continents to the United States. We studied about new immigrants that continue to flow from Latin America, recent arrivals from Asia, as well as newcomers from the Middle East, Australia, and Europe. But there was no mention of new immigrants from Africa as the discussions ended, and attention was focused on a new topic. I later asked the professor about current immigrants from Africa in the United States, and he explained that he was not aware that it was an area to be studied. He was not sure if any studies had been done on the group. He promised to look into the matter in the future, and he did. But as the professor remarked, not much has been done to study that segment of the population. And little, if anything, has been done to specifically give expressions to the high school experiences of African students in America, hence the scarcity of information on this growing group of learners. Much of the information that may be available on African history and education unfortunately reflects the "stereotype threat" that characterizes Blacks as intellectually inferior (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002, p. 114). Here in the United States society, Esquivel argues that historical documents have represented minorities

> in a negative light and/or marginalize, depoliticize, and reify a sanitized and politically neutral historical account. Such marginalization impacts the ability to address contemporary problems faced by people of color in a more holistic and contextualized fashion. Because the urgency and history of such problems are not made apparent in these renderings, their histories – and by extension, the histories of people of color – often seem to lack legitimacy (Esquivel, 2003, 123).

My second motivation was the need to address historical imbalance in literature with regard to the people of color, because it remains an uphill task. That is why this study is significant in several ways. First, the voices and experiences of recent African immigrant students appear to be limited in discussions and publications regarding contemporary education in America (Zinn & Macedo, 2005). Most of the African graduate students that I have met have spoken about a lack of recognition, disdain, neglect, invisibility, marginality, and silencing that they have experienced in the American school system. Some of them are getting used to being unintentionally ignored or deliberately overlooked. Indeed, "such omission can be seen in the virtual absence of historical literature, personal testimonies, and other documentation that unveil the struggles and issues faced by students of color" (Esquivel, 2003, p. 123), especially the recent African immigrant students.

A third reason for embarking on this project is that on the surface, the current system of education in America appears to be neutral and colorblind. The authorities claim that whatever inequalities that remain in public schools are being successfully addressed by the *No Child Left Behind* legislation of the present administration (Matthews, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2003). But the existing structure, both official and hidden parts of the curriculum, as well as daily administrative and pedagogical practices tend to marginalize recent African immigrant students. These students believe that they are portrayed less positively because of their race and geographical origin.

Fourth, there is a depressing sense of anonymity surrounding the classification of African students in American cities and towns. The State Department does keep some general records of demographics of immigrant students based on visas and SERVIS (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). But one finds difficulty accessing African students' population records in local areas in the

Midwest. For example, I went to the middle and high schools in an urban school district to request information on African students, and I was informed by the principals and registrars that such information did not exist. They acknowledged the presence of such students in their schools but explained that they neither knew how many there were nor how to reach out to them in order to offer them some sense of belonging and acceptance.

I then went to the school district headquarters, and again, everyone, including the research department and the ESL department, opined that they had never thought about generating information specifically on African-born students. They had some information about students from other continents and language groups (mainly Asians and Latin Americans), but it appeared that no one had given a serious thought to compiling any data about immigrant students from Africa. Some teachers in the district acknowledged awareness of a growing number of recent African immigrant students in their schools, and how a good number of them were aloof in classrooms and school environments.

Efforts were being made to integrate new Latino, European, and Asian students in the schools, as Spanish, French, and Chinese language classes have either been introduced or are being considered. But why is very little, if anything, being done for African students? There is some reluctance on the part of some school districts to rethink their exclusionary practices which negatively affect learning among African students. Such reluctance reveals a spirit of indifference towards accommodating the needs of such a distinct group of minority students. When recent African immigrant students are uncritically grouped with the bigger but culturally different African-American population, or when they are grouped as part of the minority student label, their specific identity, voices, needs, and concerns go unrecognized (Esquivel, 2003).

Fifth, part of the rationale for this study are two contributions I hope to make: (a) I plan to contribute to the sparse but growing scholarship on African immigrant education in America in order to address this consequent negligence by documenting and valuing narratives and counter-stories of recent African immigrant students. In doing so, it not only exposes the tension between stories but also helps to deconstruct the official beliefs widely held in the public school system about total inclusion and non-discrimination (Delgado, 1989). Consequently, it enables one to begin "to see who belongs, who is valued, and the falsity of inclusion" in the academic system (Esquivel, 2003, p. 126). With such a situation of negligence fully documented and the evidence clearly presented in this study, it is hoped that people may begin to appreciate the magnitude of the exclusion problem. (b) I also hope to provide useful information that may motivate educators and educational authorities to address the needs of recent African immigrant students in a more holistic way.

Odds Against African Students

Like other foreign-born learners, the African-born population in American public schools faces many odds that require strong commitment and dedication to overcome. It is necessary to understand those difficulties before discussing how they overcome such odds. One major problem that confronts the African-born students as soon as they arrive in American public schools is the lack of familiarity. People are products of their cultures and environments. Familiarity is what facilitates activities and ambitions. But when it is missing, an individual is faced with either learning the new environment in order to understand what to do, or simply improvises to survive in an unfamiliar environment. This is especially true with young learners from another continent—African-born students.

Students who are born and brought up in the American culture may be familiar with the laws, norms and values of their society, but foreign students who are arriving in America for the first time may not have a clue about lifestyle, hidden rules, and the most common expectations in the American society. They did not grow up in an American family where they could have been taught about specific norms of the American society. In view of this, African immigrant students that I interviewed complained that they were not aware of many things their school authorities thought they should know. In other words, their schools failed to make time to teach them the simple norms of their host culture. One of them explained to me how the lack of cultural familiarity made adjustment for him very difficult:

> When I arrived at my high school the first time, I thought I was going to receive some special welcome in terms of everyone helping me feel at home. I was told that Americans were wonderful and nice and hospitable people. I think that is still generally true. But I thought all strangers and immigrants received warm welcome and assistance from all the neighbors. But it never took long before I knew that the America I heard in stories was different from the America I found myself in. I slowly realized that I was going to be left on my own. There was no help or guidance. I had expected to see the same community spirit I was used to in my small village in Africa. But then I had to be awakened to the fact that the America I came into is totally different. America is a good place but it is a place where people prefer to do their own thing by themselves. Everybody just wants to be independent. Here, the community has little control of what the individual wants to do. Here people don't spent a lot of time asking strangers how they can assist them one way or another. That's why I was very lonely in my high school. And since I didn't receive information or some kind of training in my native country about this different aspect of life in here, I was somehow lost and didn't know what to do. I was a new student. I wished my high school gave me some kind of orientation on what I should know and how to live here in America, as a foreign student. Nothing prepared me for life here in America, as far as Western lifestyle is concerned, and my high school education was made more difficult for me because of lack of information. So, this is one area my high school didn't do well for me as a foreign student (Emeka).

In addition, seven major challenges confronting African immigrant students in the classroom have been identified by Rong and Brown (2002, 2007). The first is the *previous educational background* of the student, which may differ from that of a native-born American student. The level of education in some African countries is not comparable to that of the United States, and this saddles the affected African students with the responsibility of reconciling the two disparate experiences. The second militating factor against educational achievement is the student's *age of entry into school* as immigrant children enter schools in the United States upon arrival and may be placed at some grade levels that may result in a mismatch. There is also the *cultural conflict* aspect, whereby the newcomers encounter different value systems that not only result in cultural shock but also in hyper-judgmental tendencies. Unduly pulled between school cultures, where they are expected to conform to the values of the dominant society and their home culture, where parents require them to embrace their native identities, some African immigrant students sometimes become confused and develop negative attitudes towards education (Rong & Brown, 2002, 2007).

The fourth challenge is the *parental involvement* or noninvolvement, which in some cases results in misunderstanding between parents and the school. In some countries, parents do not actively involve themselves in the details of their children's education because teachers are trusted to do the job for which they are trained and paid to do. In this regard, parents get involved only in very serious difficulties or danger-to-life situations. While many American teachers equate lack of parental involvement with lack of interest in the child's education, some immigrant parents in turn interpret teachers' call for parental participation as evidence of teacher incompetence. In some cases, some immigrant parents prefer not to be visible in their child's education either to avoid revealing their illegal immigrant status or to conceal their educational illiteracy and ignorance (Rong & Brown, 2002, 2007).

The *need to work to support the family* also poses a great and difficult challenge for some African students who realize they have some moral or cultural obligations to work and support their poor families that made enormous sacrifices to bring them over to America. In this regard, survival and love of family take precedence over schooling (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Sixth is the issue of *mobility*, where frequent movements due to employment, housing, or even travel to native country by either parents or students adversely affect educational performance. This affects immigrants in general. The seventh challenge is the *psychological adjustment* that awaits students who have separated from loved ones by moving to the United States. Some immigrant students who came as refugees might have witnessed horrendous violence in wars prior to their arrival. The mental images of those events sometimes result in emotional stress, trauma, or deep depression for some immigrant students (Rong & Brown, 2002, 2007). But, despite these odds, the African student still excels academically in the United States.

Why African Students Succeed in American Public Schools

Research shows that African-born students are the most educated group in the United States, Canada, and Britain (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2007; Dixon, 2006; Rimer & Arenson, 2004; The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 1999-2000). In view of this, one will like to know the reason for such a phenomenon.

In my recent research, I chose to hear directly from successful African-born students how they beat the odds at their American public schools. Out of an initial group of 20 African-born students, I selected 10 students representing 10 African countries. To ensure equal gender representation among the 10 participants that were selected, 50% were males and 50% were females. My criteria for selection in this regard included African nativity, African cultural diversity, African geopolitical affiliations, and the number of years the respondent spent in American public schools. The ten participants represented all the major regions of the African continent. Countries represented by respondents in this research included Nigeria, Ghana, and Liberia (West African region), South Africa and Namibia (Southern Africa region), Egypt (North African region), Kenya and Ethiopia (East African region), Central African Republic (Central African region) and an island country on the far west coast of the continent called Cape Verde.

Specifically, five factors constituted the primary criteria for all the ten candidates that were purposefully selected for interviews in this study. (1) The qualifying participant must be born and partly educated in Africa before coming to the United States. (2) Emigrated to the United States in the last two decades. (3) Spent four years in a U.S. high school. (4) Graduated from a U.S. high school within the last decade. (5) In addition, each participant must represent a different African ethnic group, tribe or region. To protect their identities, their real names are not used in the study. But the following is a breakdown of background information of each of the African-born student interviewed for this work:

Background Data on Selected Study Participants

Participant Research Name	Native Country in Africa	Gender	Present Age Range	Current U.S. Residence
Emeka	Nigeria	Male	20-30	Midwest
Caster	Republic of South Africa	Female	20-30	Midwest
Mike	Namibia	Male	20-30	Midwest
Angela	Ghana	Female	20-30	Midwest
Pete	Central African Republic	Male	20-30	Midwest
Magi	Ethiopia	Female	20-30	Midwest
Victor	Cape Verde Islands	Male	20-30	Midwest

Elizabeth	Liberia	Female	20-30	Midwest
Mohammed	Egypt	Male	20-30	Midwest
Dorothy	Kenya	Female	20-30	Midwest

These ten African-born learners came to the United States in different ways or under different circumstances. But when it comes to education, they seem to share similar aspirations and almost a consensus opinion on their desire for educational opportunities. What I discovered in interviewing them appears to collaborate what a recent study found out regarding immigrant students in American schools. The findings conducted by the Program for International Student Assessment indicate that while 15-year-old immigrant students do struggle to find their feet as new comers to the American educational system, they nevertheless share a desideratum for success (CNN Educational Report, 2006). The study showed that first-generation immigrant students (children who, like the parents, were born outside the United States) and their second-generation counterparts (those born in the U.S. to foreign-born parents) do lag behind initially before they begin to pick up on their academic performance. On the positive side, however, the research identified three important characteristics of these immigrant students: (a) "They want to learn," (b) "They're excited about going to school," and (c) "They have high expectations for themselves" (CNN Educational Report, 2006, p. 1).

The above traits characterize African-born students I interviewed in this study. In different words reflecting their levels of English proficiency, they expressed how they had been taught in their African societies that good education was the key to future prosperity and success. They explain their love for learning even when the circumstances appear difficult. The obstacles they had overcome in their native lands had prepared them to face similar huddles and scale them successfully. Moreover, the excitement of attending school in the greatest country in the world outweighs the idea of focusing on hiccups associated with starting an educational journey in a foreign country. These African-born students were carrying ambitions that appeared larger than themselves. But overall, the concept that they continued to repeat through the interviews was individual desideratum. Their primary response to my question on why and how they were able to beat the odds at their American public schools was that they individually took responsibilities for their education. They saw it as a rare opportunity that a serious individual could not afford to miss. The phrase they used over and over was personal determination to which they attributed their success.

Drive to Succeed in the African Culture

One of the factors that motivated me to undertake this study was the story of an African student in one of the classes I taught at the university. Emeka immigrated to the United States from Nigeria with his parents in 2000. In Africa, they lived a relatively comfortable middle class life. They heard great success stories about the United States. Emeka and his parents sold their family business, gave money to the needy, and moved to the "New World," in order to begin what they hoped would become a more prosperous life.

But when his parents found the transition to American life too hard and returned to Nigeria two years later, he decided to stay back, entranced by the thought of receiving tuition-free high school education and attending college thereafter. To support himself, he found a job at a fast-food place. He shared a run-down studio apartment in a low-income neighborhood for $300. He worked after school and weekends with a monthly income of $510. His rent and utility bills cost $420 and the Metro/taxi transportation took $56. That left $34 a month to get by. He bought the cheapest food he could find and skipped one meal on a Saturday and another on a Sunday to avoid running completely out of cash. He relied on two free meals a day at school. Sometimes, he was a recipient of an unexpected kind act from an African teacher in his school who would sporadically give him $20 or $40.

He had no health insurance, telephone, credit card, cable TV, automobile, or writing desk. He bought all his clothes, kitchen utensils, toiletries, and household appliances from thrift stores and yard sales. His worn-out shoes and clothes ensured he could not fit in or compete among his high school classmates, and he preferred to sit at the back of his classes to avoid being noticed. He had few friends and hoped some of his peers would stop referring to him as “Jungle Africa.” On many occasions, he missed educational field trips in his school because he could not pay for them. Despite these conditions, he told me he was happy to be attending school because he was taught while growing up in Africa that education is the way to success. He confessed that these circumstances in which he found himself had some impact in the way he viewed his schooling experiences in America.

Despite the odds, Emeka succeeded in high school and received his diploma in 2006. With the help of scholarships, he went to a university and in May 2010, he graduated with a bachelor’s degree *Magna Cum Laude*. Emeka’s story and my experience teaching in American public schools propelled me to investigate how African students beat the odds in American public schools.

Personal Determination

African students in American public schools whom I interviewed for this study credited their personal determination as the reason they succeeded in graduating from high schools and moving on to college education. What makes it significant, among others, is that majority of them attended some inner-city schools where the dropout rates were very high. In expressing the same concept of personal determination, they used phrases such as

> I decided in my mind (Pete)
>
> I was determined (Magi)
>
> I believed I would make it (Caster)
>
> I knew it's my responsibility to finish and graduate (Mike)
>
> I wanted to be the first in my family to go to college (Mohammed)
>
> Personal decision, you know (Angela)
>
> I took charge of my own life and future (Emeka)
>
> I worked hard and God gave me victory (Victor)
>
> My mom and dad and uncles told me to make them proud by becoming something in Life (Elizabeth)

They said there were several times their situations deteriorated and they were tempted to quit. But, through personal determination, they were able, as foreign students, to scale the hurdles of cultural adaptation. They believed the American dream was within reach if they stayed in school. When I asked them if personal determination was the only thing they could credit for their success, they individually replied in the negative. “In fact, so many people contributed to my success at school,” Dorothy said. She then went on to mention some of her teachers, administrators, neighbors, church members, peers, parents, family relations, and a few others who played significant roles in her success story. But, time and again, she and the other interview participants kept returning to the issue of personal determination as the primary factor responsible for their safe landing with regard to their public school achievements.

In this study, personal determination is defined as a vow by African immigrant students to strive to succeed irrespective of obstacles. It is a desideratum for success built on the notion that good education is the way to overcome poverty, disdain, oppression, and other curable ills, as well as the clearest way to achieve freedom and rise to the top of one's chosen career. Personal determination connotes a firm commitment to distinguish oneself in order to acquire what it takes to finally become an employer instead of employee. This view of personal responsibility is informed by the logic of an African proverb that states, "He that provides the food decides who partakes in eating the meals and what time the meal is served." African students here believe that with good education, they could become providers rather than receivers. African cultures generally teach the young in the society to grow up to become providers and deciders of their own destiny. Growing up in African cultures as children before arriving in the United States, the African immigrant students in this study might have been immersed in African worldviews such as the belief that they should learn to improvise in the face of hindrances and handicaps in order to succeed in education and then distinguish themselves in innovative hard work so that they can control their own destiny.

Why is success so important to my interview participants? They said they wanted success not for the sake of success itself, but because it was the only way they could justify their emigration to the United States. They argued that many family and extended-family members had sacrificed to raise money to send them to the United States. They, therefore, owe a cultural debt that requires them to succeed and turn around to become a springboard for the next generation in their native clans, hamlets, tribes, and countries. In other words, failure was not an option as it would spell doom for those waiting for their help. In explaining why they thought they had to succeed in school, they used words and phrases such as "It's all about survival," "I got no choice," "it's up to me," "What else?," "I got to move on," and "I just wanna succeed, that's it."

The general view of African students participating in this study was that they decided to hold themselves accountable in the pursuit of success. As already indicated, they attributed their successes in high school to personal determination. They identified two things they said their parents and guardians had told them before they arrived in America: (a) that "no excuses" were going to be accepted for failure; in other words, they were going to be solely responsible for their own survival, progress, and success – no matter whatever difficulties that might be on their way, and (b) that everybody in their families was counting on them not to disappoint; that is, they were the "hope" of their family. They told me that if they were to fail, it would be a failure for their entire family. They were told that they were not in America for themselves alone; rather, they were both ambassadors of their families and the ladder for the next generation of their people. With this expectation and pressure, African immigrant students said they felt they had "no choice" but to "endure" whatever it would take for them to succeed in both education and future careers in the United States.

> The reason I made it through high school successfully was not because it was pretty. It was actually tough and rough especially in my urban school environment. There were many obstacles on my way as a foreign person. I just give the glory to God. Jesus was with me and saved me from trouble. I can say that I made it because of my personal decision. I was determined to get to the university so I can become a doctor. It's been my dream. I got no choice. I had no other option. My extended family members kept reminding me that dropping out of school wasn't an option. Therefore, I had to do whatever it takes. I guess that's life. You take it as it comes and make the most out of it (Elizabeth).
>
> For me, the main factor that contributed to my challenges was where I came from. I noticed that many people here didn't have a good opinion of Africa. So, I decided to teach them that I'm not dumb as they think. I don't like it when I hear them say that blacks don't do well in education. Who told them that? Africans are the smartest people in the world. It's just that we didn't have all the opportunities they have here…. But on the factors that contributed to my success in high school, it's my own determination

> against all odds. Whenever something bad happened, I said to myself, I got to move on. Look, I just wanna succeed, that's it. My mom said to me, "We're counting on you; you are the hope of the family." So, it's all about survival (Caster).

> See, I came here for education and I decided I'm gonna get it no matter the cost, no matter what it takes. You know, no good thing is easy. It's like going on foot to the stream to fetch water and then finding out when you are already on your way that soldier ants are everywhere on the road. Well, if you need the water that bad, you have to endure the bites from the soldier ants as you make your way to the stream so that you can get the water you need (Emeka).

> My dad told me that American education is one of the best in the world, and that I would need it in order to succeed here. But he didn't tell me about what it was going to take to get it. I came thinking it was easy. Now, I'm not saying that the school was bad or anything like that. But my dad didn't let me know that I will go through fire to get that education [laughter]. Maybe, if he had told me, I might have said I will not go. But maybe, he didn't know himself. For him, he didn't even finish high school because his parents had no money to pay his school fees. But, anyway, to answer your question, I want to say that I succeeded because I knew I had to. It's up to me. After all, no matter the problems, this country still gives me a great opportunity for success and I got to seize it with both hands (Mike).

> Every time I told my parents the problems I was encountering in school, they would encourage me and tell me that I had to endure whatever I was experiencing in school. They said it's good to endure for survival because the pay-off is more important than the trouble. Their thing is, you have to tolerate a lot of things you see every blessed day in order to achieve your goal and get to the top. It was like a command that I have to succeed. What else can you do? (Angela).

The results encapsulated in the above narrative statements reveal the perspectives of individual African immigrant students about the factors responsible for the challenges and successes of their high school endeavors. While they never went into castigating their public schools and dismissing the good opportunities the schools offered to them, they also never credited their urban high school environments with their successes. They rather held tenaciously to the view that it was their vows to duke it out with whatever confronted them in their educational pursuit that eventually ensured their success.

When I asked them to elaborate on their high school failures and achievements, the African students initially felt more comfortable discussing the challenges they overcame in high school rather than discussing their successes specifically, whatever those successes might be at this point. Part of the reason for preferring to avoid glorying in their perceived achievements was cultural in the sense that many African cultures viewed success as a result of collective efforts instead of an individual endeavor. Though they acknowledged "personal determination" as a major factor, they still credited their families and native cultures with instilling such spirit of personal determination in them. "The power of my strong determination came from my people" (Pete). In the words of Dorothy, "If my parents and other family members had not pushed me, I would not have resolved to fight to the end until I succeed." That is why many Africans feel shy about talking about their individual successes. But in most cases, they are not shy about discussing their failures or challenges.

Angela, Elizabeth, Pete, Mike, Dorothy, and Victor further explained that they were able to succeed in their high school education by harnessing those qualities of patience, hard work, maximization of opportunities, toleration of insults, intense focus on goal, and concentration that they were taught while growing up in their different countries in Africa. They acknowledged that they were told that although the United States was a land of great opportunities for all, their individual success was a personal responsibility. In this regard, the student from Liberia makes a comparison between work ethic in Africa and the United States:

> Africans are not lazy. We know how to survive all situations, no matter where someone puts us. In fact, many Africans work harder in Africa than many Americans do here in the United States. The problem is that in Africa, there are few opportunities and little reward for your great efforts. But here, there are so many opportunities where you can devote your labor and be rewarded big time. The reason I came to the United States is because the pay is bigger here. When you work hard you have something to show for it. But it is not so in many places in Africa where the government is corrupt and they don't provide meaningful opportunities for the citizens. If I had as many opportunities in Africa as I have here, I would have remained in Africa to make my money. Right now, I can tell you honestly that I miss my village in Africa and I'm homesick a lot of time. I enjoy life in Africa. I just want to have the resources I can take back with me so I can be in a better

> position to help others. I'm gonna go home after I make good money here. After all, there is no place like home (Elizabeth).

At the end, all of my respondents expressed gratitude to the American government for affordable secondary school education in this country but they wished the financial situation would be the same with attending colleges, where 80% of them are currently struggling with paying tuition fees. They were hungry for more education but were also having difficulties with college costs and medical expenses. At the time of this study, they were in universities and community colleges in the Midwest pursuing different degrees. As foreign students, some of them did not qualify for many forms of financial aid. Some have received green cards and a few are still working on theirs. But all of them were working one or two jobs while pursuing degrees in universities and community colleges. They reported that their quest for education was born in Africa and is being fulfilled in America. All of them were hoping to go all the way to doctoral levels of education in their different fields, depending on opportunities.

To strengthen their personal determination to succeed, they said they decided to link up with one another. In view of the fact that they were vastly outnumbered in their school environments, the African immigrant students said that they relied on one another for comfort and encouragement. They found solace in either forming an informal African student group or joining whatever African groups they could find. Their fellow African students became their confidants. That provided the support they needed to succeed. What they could not find in their classrooms, they reported that they found with one another. This type of network provided the atmosphere that was crucial to the successes of those that emerged victorious from their high school environments.

It needs to be borne in mind that African students in American public schools liked their schools and the commitments of the schools to ensure decent and safe environments for learning, but these foreign-born students also believed that their learning needs were not met by the ways they were taught in American public schools. The perspectives they had about their schools portrayed good centers of learning that were trying to educate their population but did not know how to effectively teach their immigrant population. Although all of them (100%) graduated from high school and went on to universities and colleges, their consensus was that their high school experiences would have been better if teachers and administrators had been trained on how to teach and relate to African immigrant students. In other words, there was a lack of what multicultural educators refer to as culturally relevant pedagogy (Banks et al., 2005; Gay, 2000). Their description of learning environments indicated that there was little skill in managing culturally diverse classrooms (Holloway, 2003).

All the respondents repeatedly identified personal determination as the factor responsible for their success. To them, personal determination is a vow to strive to succeed irrespective of obstacles. Again, it is a desideratum for success built on the notion that good education is the way to overcome poverty, disdain, oppression, and other curable ills, as well as the clearest way to achieve freedom and rise to the top of one's chosen career. In the context of this study, part of such individual commitment or decision relates to cultural capital. Personal determination connotes a firm commitment to distinguish oneself in order to acquire what it takes to finally become an employer instead of employee. All the African immigrant students (100%) interviewed held strongly to this conclusion for their individual achievements in education. One of them summarized the source of that factor in one sentence: "The power of my strong determination came from my people" (Pete). This is in part a reflection of the African community spirit, a cherished dictum – "I am because we are," as contrasted with the Western philosophy of individualism – "We are because I am" (Gerhman, 1989, p. 56).

In dissecting these results, one can gain valuable insights into the personal perspectives of first-generation African immigrant students who have graduated from American public high schools in the last decade. As I attempt to interpret the perspectives of the participants in this study, I notice the impact of the values and life philosophies that their families inculcated in them. Many of them seem to measure their progress against the backdrop of their African families and clans. Based on the educational history of their families, some of them viewed themselves as either pioneers, survivors, or path-makers, rather than individual victors. They believed that they still had a long way to go, and that it was too early to declare victory or success. They cautioned themselves against the idea of counting the chickens before they were hatched. Therefore, they preferred not to take a type of premature victory lap while they were still in hot pursuit of their American dream.

Summary of Findings

The results of the study showed that African students who participated in this study believe that their schools were good centers of learning. But all of them (100%) called for a change or improvement on how immigrant students are welcomed and taught in the classroom. They want their teachers to demonstrate that they have high expectations for African students. In this study, 50% of these participants said their teachers did not believe in their abilities to be successful. In another instance 80% of them opined that they would like their schools to discourage American-born students from disrespecting their African culture, and 80% did not believe that their accented English was respected in class. As much as 90% of them said that their teachers never included their cultures in their teaching arrangements, 50% wants teachers to increase the use of discussions to engage them in learning, 80% requested the inclusion of positive discussions of Africa in their textbooks, 90% expected their teachers to employ illustrations that they were familiar with in class pedagogy, 50% would like their teachers to advocate for them in school, 80% wanted their teachers to use a variety of ways to assess their learning, 60% desired a close or good relationship with their teacher in terms of the teacher demonstrating some understanding regarding the difficulties that foreign students faced.

In collaborating findings contained in the above perspectives of African-born students in terms of teachers focusing only on their already planned curriculum, David Levine and other scholars called on teachers to take cognizance of the identities of students in their classes and make allowances for changes or additions in their curriculum (Levine 1995; Butcher 2012). The writers devoted time to critiquing the traditional ways of distributing resources and instructions, theoretically and practically, and even attacked new curricular reforms that accommodated what they called "antidemocratic premises" (Levine 1995, p. 49). They subsequently proffered solutions by providing concrete or specific examples of how teachers and school administrators can help to birth transformation of classroom education. In the chapter, "Building a Vision of Curriculum Reform," Levine makes a case for reaching outside the familiar cultural box to find newer concepts. He noted areas from which frantic calls for such reforms are emanating: "from the cries of battle-weary teachers, from parents whose children aren't learning, from business people worried about their future work force, from legislators alarmed at the growth of an economic underclass" (1995, p. 52).

Conclusion

Part of what this research demonstrates is not only the affirmation that all students can learn but also the fact that academic performance of students is influenced by several factors in and out of the school environment. African American students, not just African students, will excel at the highest level of education and perform as well as anyone if they are given the same preparation, equipment and learning environment. The same applies to all other ethnic groups. The fact that all students can learn and do well in education is not just a slogan. It is a fact.

Despite the recent successes of African immigrant students, however, more needs to be done to facilitate the full inclusion of hundreds of new immigrant students that continue to troop to the United States and other developed countries. Many of them will become a significant part of the future of America and the rest of the western world. To this end, their teachers deserve all the support, training, and equipment that are required to carry out their job successfully.

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Abstract

Unnoticed and unrecognized, recent African students have beaten the odds that surround them in the American public education system to become the new most educated group of immigrants in the United States, Canada, and Britain. Reporting the results of his new research study in *Against All Odds: How African Students Became the Most Educated Group*, especially in the United States of America where he focused his work, Dr. Kenneth Butcher identifies seven challenges confronting students from Africa in addition to their initial lack of cultural familiarity with the mainstream culture of their host society. He then underscores the factors responsible for their success which have made them the new 'model minority' group in the industrialized countries of the world. Judging by the findings of the research, one can understand why an African nation (Nigeria) is now the country with the highest number of PhD graduates besides the United States. In the view of Dr. Butcher, it is not far-fetched to foresee the future of education and new discoveries in Africa. He impliedly predicts that the next century will be Africa's century.

Biography

Kenneth Butcher, Ph.D.

Kenneth Chukwudi Butcher specializes in American and African education and politics. He taught in Nigeria for over a decade before coming to the United States. His educational activities have taken him to Kenya, Israel, Uganda, Egypt, Congo, Ethiopia, Togo, Benin Republic, Nigeria and here in the United States. In the last ten years, Dr. Butcher has been involved in promoting inclusive political dialogue and culturally relevant pedagogy in America's classrooms. He earned a Ph.D. degree in Education and Geosciences from the University of Missouri. He has taught at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, and at Avila University. He has also taught Political Science and American National Politics, including American Constitution, at Maple Woods College (Metropolitan Community College). He is currently the President of Amara International in Kansas City, Missouri, United States.