

Characteristics and Challenges of High Achieving Second-Generation Nigerian Youths in the United States

Patricia Ngozi Anekwe

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CHARACTERISTICS AND CHALLENGES OF HIGH-ACHIEVING
SECOND-GENERATION NIGERIAN YOUTH IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

This study investigated the characteristics and challenges of high-achieving second-generation Nigerian youths in the United States. An increasing number of youths in America's schools are from immigrant backgrounds due to the flow of immigration from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Given the local and national mandates to improve the academic achievement of all children, we cannot afford to leave any group behind.

Although research on immigrant children from Asia and Latin America and their adaptation and schooling has increased in the last two decades, the educational experiences of Black immigrant children from Africa and the Caribbean have been understudied. The scant research on African immigrants lumps all Africans into a homogeneous group despite the different experiences and obvious diversity found within Africa and among African immigrants. Using theoretical triangulation from Educational Anthropology (cultural ecological theory), Sociology (Social capital), and Psychology (social cognitive theory), the researcher examined the role of parents, personal traits, and social contexts on the academic experiences of high-achieving second-generation Nigerian youths.

The study used surveys, in-depth interviews of Nigerian youths and parents (mothers) and a focus group interview of high-achieving second-generation Nigerian youths to explore the academic experiences of high-achieving second-generation Nigerian youths to identify factors that determine their educational outcomes. It is anticipated that the results of this

study will contribute to the literature on immigrant, minority, and Black students' education in the United States.

High-achieving second-generation Nigerian youths credited their parents, extended family, the Nigerian community, and their upbringing for their motivation and academic success. Nigerian parents were actively engaged with the education of their children, both in the traditional realms of school involvement and in the non-traditional school engagement. Although youths faced the challenges of peer teasing, underpreparation for college, and parental pressure, they devised coping strategies through code-switching, reevaluating their definition of academic success, and increasing determination and effort. They also were involved in several extracurricular activities that helped them to create social networks with peers and adults and to break social barriers.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my aunt and hero, Patricia Mary-Carmel Attah, who by sending my father to school planted the seed of education in my family, and to my father-in-law, Didigwu Anekwe, who laid the foundation for the education of his children.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND IDENTIFICATION OF THE TOPIC

Black immigrant youths are overrepresented at elite academic institutions and the overrepresentation is greatest in the most exclusive stratum.

Massey et al., 2007

The United States is a nation of immigrants, and this has important ramifications for educational researchers, policy makers, and practitioners due to the number of first- and second-generation youths in America's schools. The educational outcome of these children determines their future occupational and economic success in American society as well as their transition into adulthood (Sherrod, Haggerty, & Featherman, 1993). Yet, research on new immigrants often focuses on the first-generation adults, neglecting the second-generation youths who are highly visible in the schools and whose adaptation has dire consequences for our schools and society (Rumbaut, 1994a). Approximately 20% of school-age children in the US are from an immigrant family (Conchas, 2001; Zhou, 1997). Research focusing on the academic outcomes of second-generation immigrant children from Asia and Latin America has increased, whereas second-generation African youngsters have been understudied (Qin-Hillard, Feinauer, & Quiroz, 2001). The scant quantitative research that has been conducted on second-generation Africans concluded that they are performing well academically (Massey, Mooney, Torres, & Charles, 2007; Rong & Brown, 2001). This qualitative study focused on high-achieving second-generation Nigerian youths to identify the factors that determine their academic outcomes.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, there were 53 million children in public and private schools in 2000; and 40% of the total public school population is

composed of minority students (National Center of Educational Statistics, 2000). By the year 2020, it is projected that the majority of the school population will be African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans (Meece & Kurtz-Costes, 2001). Undoubtedly, immigrant children and second-generation youths from Africa will contribute to this demographic trend. In 1990, about 60% of Hispanic children and 90% of Asian American children were first- or second-generation (Zhou, 1997). The 2000 Census estimate indicates that 34% of youths ages 15-19 were from immigrant groups, and this number is projected to increase to 46% by 2025 (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Children with immigrant backgrounds represented one fifth of the United States student population (Noguera, 2004). It is projected that by the year 2010, “the population of first-generation and second-generation Black children will reach 4.3 million or about 12% of the total U.S. Black population” (Rong & Brown, 2001, p. 537).

While the number of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa nearly tripled in the 1990s, the number of Afro-Caribbean immigrants increased by more than 60% (Logan & Deane, 2003). Logan and Deane also noted that nearly 25% of the growth of the Black population in the United States between 1990 and 2000 was the result of immigration from Africa and the Caribbean. Yet, little research is available on the academic outcomes of children of African immigrants because research on Black immigrants is often linked to immigration studies rather than minority academic achievement (Massey et al., 2007).

Immigrant children generally face many challenges in school because they are not only dealing with a new environment but also are struggling to adapt to a new culture with a different educational system (Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; Rumbaut, 1994a; Zhou, 1997). Issues of race, identity, class, gender, legal status, and language barriers may compound such

problems for some immigrant children (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Racial prejudice toward Black immigrants is an additional burden that impacts the educational and socioeconomic aspirations of Black immigrant children. These youths are likely to encounter “discrimination, lower expectations, and less encouragement from teachers and others in positions of authority in schools and the community” (Hirschman, 2001, p. 331). Immigrant youths, including those born to African immigrants, are currently found in both urban and suburban schools, and their presence cannot be ignored (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean, and Central America may also have additional burdens due to their race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, all of which can negatively affect their children’s education (Rong & Brown, 2002).

Clearly, immigrants and their children “bring experiences and issues to schools that are unique and deserve close analysis and understanding” (Goodwin, 2002, p. 162). This study focused on three areas of concern. First, this study examined the academic experiences of high-achieving second-generation Nigerian youths. Secondly, the study looked at the effects of the family, school, community, and individual traits on the academic achievement of high-achieving second-generation Nigerians. Lastly, the study identified the challenges facing high-achieving second-generation Nigerian youths and how these youth dealt with such challenges.

Rationale for the Study

A review of the literature reveals that most of the studies conducted on immigrant children were done on the children of immigrants from Asia and Latin America (Fernandez-Kelly & Schaufler, 1994; Gans, 1992; Goyette & Xie, 1999; Hirschman & Wong, 1986; Suarez-Orozco, 1987; Zhou, 1997). Such studies have yielded different results for different

groups and within the same group (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Kao, Tienda & Schneider, 1996). Despite the increased number of second-generation Black students in our schools, an extensive literature review revealed a dearth of research on second-generation youths from Africa.

Bryce-Laporte (1972) described the experience of Black immigrants in the United States as one of invisibility and inequality. Consistent with this earlier finding, Butcher (1994) noted that very little research was available on Black immigrant children and especially on African immigrants and their children. Three years later, Dadoo (1997) wrote that the experiences of Black immigrants have been under-researched compared to Asian and Hispanic immigrants. Although there has been little research interest on African immigrants in the United States, there have been debates about the highly visible representation of second-generation African youths in America's elite colleges (Rimer & Arenson, 2004).

A recently published study indicated that while second-generation Africans and Afro-Caribbeans make up less than 1% of the U.S. population (Logan & Deane, 2003), they comprise over 43% of Blacks in selective colleges and universities in the United States (Massey et al., 2007). Massey et al. (2007) concluded that second-generation Black students in exclusive colleges exhibited the academic qualifications these colleges required for entrance, such as high grade-point averages and high standardized test scores. Yet, no research is available on what determines such educational outcomes for second-generation Blacks from Africa and on how these youths negotiate their academic experiences in the United States.

Rumbaut (1994b) indicated that the regions of Asia and Africa had a greater flow of immigrants to the United States in the 1980s than in any other time in U.S. history, and the

trend continues. Immigrants are changing the American landscape. In just a decade, the Asian population in the United States went from 1.5 million in 1970 to 3.5 million in 1980, (Hurh & Kim, 1989). The population of African immigrants in the US grew to 418,000 from 1820 to 1993 (Rong & Brown, 2002), but from 1990 to 2000, the population of African-born U.S. residents surged from 364,000 to more than 881,000, more than doubling in a decade (Grieco, 2004). Although 1.7 million sub-Saharan Africans reside in the United States (Roberts, 2005), there is a scarcity of research on the schooling experiences of their children.

This study investigated the factors that determine the educational outcomes of high-achieving second-generation Nigerian youths (children of Nigerian immigrants) living in the United States. It is important to examine this population to understand how they experience schooling in the United States. If schools are to provide adequate services to the children of African immigrants, studies of this population are needed to better understand their unique experiences as immigrant children and how to appropriately serve their needs. This investigation builds research on the backgrounds and the experiences of high-achieving second-generation Nigerian students and identifies services required for these students to succeed in their academic endeavors.

This investigation is necessary and timely given the academic achievement gap between Black and White students in American schools (Bali & Alvarez, 2004; Meece & Kurtz-Costes, 2001; Mickleleson, 2003). If this achievement gap is to be closed, it is important that we examine the educational experiences of all Black students, including the children of African immigrants. This research is also important in light of the No Child Left Behind mandate of 2001, which requires that all children are to be adequately educated. It is

important to understand the experiences of individuals as well as of the diverse groups of students found in our schools.

Statement of the Problem

In 1997, the foreign-born population of the United States numbered 26.8 million, or 10% of the total population, whereas the foreign-born population and their children numbered 54.7 million (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). As Suarez-Orozco (2001) noted, globalization contributes to the high rate of immigration to the United States. Portes and Rumbaut noted, “immigrant children and U.S.-born children of immigrants are the fastest-growing segment of the country’s total population of children under 18 years of age” (p. 19). The future of immigrants and their children will be shaped by their educational experiences in the United States. In 2002, the foreign-born population had reached 32.5 million, or 11.5% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Many of the recent immigrants are from minority groups. From 1990 to 2000, the population of Asians in the U.S. grew by 44%; of Hispanics, by 61.4%; of Afro-Caribbeans, by 66.9%. Over the same period, the rate of immigration for Africans grew by 166%, making Africans the group with the fastest rate of immigration (Logan & Deane, 2003).

Despite the current demographic trends, there is a scarcity of research on the schooling experiences of immigrant children and second-generation children. The few available studies focus on the adjustment problems immigrant children face in learning a new language and culture (Phuntsog, 2000). This trend is being reversed with a growing scholarly interest in the stories of second-generation immigrants in the United States (Ramakrishnan, 2004) due to the post-1965 wave of immigration. Yet, the scholarly revival has not been extended to immigrant youths from Africa.

This has increased visibility of second-generation youths of Asian, Hispanic, Caribbean, and African continental background in American schools (Portes & MacLeod, 1999). The number of children in immigrant families in the United States grew by 47% from 1990 to 1997 (Qin-Hilliard, Feinauer, & Quiroz, 2001). Logan and Deane (2003) noted that the percentage of foreign-born population among Blacks is higher than that of the Asian foreign-born population. Although studies have examined the experiences of second-generation subgroups from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, there is a need for research on the schooling experiences of African immigrant children so their educators can understand the educational experiences of this particular group.

Researchers and educators often lump all Black students into one category, ignoring the different realities and cultural differences between African-Americans, Afro-Caribbean, and African immigrants (Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi, & Johnson, 1990). Though categorized as Black, these students “differ widely in national and class origins, phenotypes, languages, cultures, generation, immigration histories, and modes of incorporation in the United States” (Rumbaut, 1996, p. 120). African and Afro-Caribbean immigrants are classified as Black as if they all share a monolithic culture in America’s socioeconomic system (Bashi, & Zuberi, 1997). However, children of African immigrants have different experiences and cultural backgrounds that might impact how they experience the educational system in the United States. Although Rong and Brown (2001) found that second- and third-generation African youths had less educational attainment than their parents, “theoretical speculations, journalistic accounts and recent research” have found that the children of African immigrants have done well in U.S. schools (Rong & Brown, 2002, p. 251). Even among African immigrants and their children, the educational attainment of the groups varies

(Goodwin, 2002). There is clearly a need for more empirical and ethnographic research on the academic experiences of second-generation Africans in the United States.

Although high-achieving second-generation Nigerian youths are Black, they often come from families in which their parents are college-educated and speak English fluently, though with an accent. Black African immigrants have the highest educational attainment level of any immigrant group in the United States (Butcher, 1994). On average, they have completed 15.7 years of schooling, the equivalent of 3.7 years of college. A higher percentage (53.3%) of Black African immigrants are college graduates or have attended some college, which is more than any other group, including White natives and White immigrants. Some high-achieving second-generation youths, like other immigrant children from highly educated groups, such as immigrants from India, Korea, and Japan, attend schools in “high property wealth suburban districts” (Miller & Tanners, 1995, p. 675), whereas others might find themselves in poorly funded inner-city school districts despite their parents’ educational qualifications.

Immigrant youths and Blacks face issues that need to be identified in order to better educate them in our schools. Immigrant Blacks are not immune to racial barriers in American society because “race plays a significant part in children’s socialization and in their academic pursuits” (Rong & Brown, 2002, p. 252). This factor might affect the beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of immigrants and how they raise their children. Although racism and discrimination may present barriers to the academic progress of high-achieving second-generation Nigerian youths, they may also “serve as a spur for renewed determination to succeed” (Hirschman, 2001, p. 335), given a supportive family and community. This is irrespective of the fact that minority and immigrant status are often presented in research as a

liability to overcome rather than as an asset that such groups can tap into (Kao & Thompson, 2003). The increased diversity of the Black student population in our nation's schools requires increased research to understand the varied experiences of each group.

Significance of the Study

This investigation sheds light on the unique backgrounds of high-achieving children of Nigerian immigrants as well as the issues they face as they experience the American educational system and delineates factors responsible for the successes of these youths. This study also adds to the body of literature available on multicultural education, which is needed as America is increasingly becoming more diverse (Kao & Thompson, 2003).

In addition, this study contributes to improving the quality of immigrant education as well as of urban education. Given local and national mandates to increase the educational achievement of students, there is an urgency to find ways to ensure that all students achieve. Given the "dearth of research" on successful Black students (Cooper & Thornton, 1999, p. 2), it is time to shift from deficit thinking about Black student academic achievement to understand why some students in schools perform well despite what might appear to be great odds. Research on Black students often focuses on the under-achieving ones, yet there are many Black students who have defied great odds to achieve academic excellence. There is also a need to pay attention to the economic, cultural, linguistic, and immigrant backgrounds of different minority groups given the increased number and diversity of today's immigrants. More research is needed to better understand how various contexts affect the academic outcomes of different second-generation groups such as the Nigerians in this study.

Brief Definition of Key Terms

It is important to define some terms for the reader to better understand the issues and the approach that the researcher is taking in this study.

1. *Academic achievement* is used in this study to refer to teacher grades, grade-point average, honors and academic awards, class rank, college attendance, and standardized test scores such as the SAT (Johnson, 1992).
2. *Co-ethnics* refer to immigrants who share the same national or ethnic identity (Portes & MacLeod, 1999).
3. *Cultural capital* is defined here as the non-dominant culture that Nigerian parents might tap into to motivate their children and could be in the form of norms or fictive kinship with other Nigerian immigrants (Carter, 2003).
4. *Data triangulation* consists of the use of multiple and different sources of information to form themes and categories (Creswell & Miller, 2000) as a means of validating information collected from one source with another source (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
5. *Educational aspiration* is the future educational attainment level as well as the future career goal youths set for themselves. In other words, it is the levels of education students wish to attain (Harris, 2006).
6. *Educational attainment* refers to the number of honors and advanced placement (AP) courses taken in high school, “participation in extracurricular activities, post-secondary school choice” (Astone & McLanahan, 1991, p. 310), as well as the total number of years of schooling obtained in relation to age.

7. *Educational outcomes* refer to educational achievement, educational attainment, aspiration, achievement, motivation, attitudes, and behavior.
8. *Folk theory* refers to common-sense beliefs and intuitive decisions that ordinary people possess and that are shaped by their cultural and life experiences (Li, 2004).
9. *High achievement* is demonstrated through a grade point average of 3.0 or better out of 4.0; the difficulty level of high school classes; standardized test scores (SAT and ACT) of more than 1200 out of 1600 or more than 1750 out of 2400 or ACT score of 27 or higher out of 36; involvement in extracurricular activities; and awards and recognitions.
10. *Human capital* consists of parental education as measured by the number of years of schooling and linguistic and other skills (Portes & MacLeod, 1999).
11. *Motivation* is the process of initiating and sustaining self-directed goals (Schunk, 1990) as well as the type of academic choices students make and the effort and persistence they put into pursuing such choices (Wigfield, Eccles, & Rodriguez, 1998).
12. *Second-generation* refers to the children of immigrants (Zhou, 1997). These children are also known as *American-born children of foreign-born parents* (Kao & Tienda, 1995). For the purposes of this study, second-generation refers to children born in the United States to Nigerian immigrants and children born in Nigeria who emigrated before the age of five.
13. *Socioeconomic status* is used here to refer to the educational level, family size, and the occupation of the parents of second-generation Nigerian youths.