THE ADJUSTMENT EXPERIENCES OF AN IMMIGRANT STUDENT TO SCHOOLING IN BERRIEN SPRINGS, MICHIGAN, USA

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing wave of immigration into the United States, there is the tendency to concentrate more on the adaptation process of adults to the neglect of those of young people. However, the adaptation process of immigrant children especially the educational and psychosocial challenges they face are equally daunting. While some research has gone into looking at the complex issues that affect these groups of immigrants, it is apparent that a lot more remains to be done. This is because the literature seems to indicate that the adjustment patterns for immigrants from different parts of the world, different family backgrounds, and different age groups may differ. This narrative qualitative study attempts to document some of the adjustment experiences of an immigrant young person from an English speaking West African country. A pseudonym is used for the subject to disguise his identity. The results of the study indicate the importance of the school, the support provided by family, and the ability to make trusted friends as critical in the early adjustment process. There were also indications that while the first year of arrival in the U. S. is most critical in the adjustment process, complete integration into the society may take longer depending among others on the age of the child at the time of immigration.

Keywords: Immigrant Children, Adjustment Process, Immigrant Paradox.

INTRODUCTION

The complex issue of the adjustment of immigrant children into the United States society has come to the fore in recent times because of the significant rise in immigration from various parts of the world, as well as the high birth rates among some immigrant groups. While one cannot dispute the fact that considerable scholarship has gone into studying adult immigrant groups and how they adjust into their new society, research literature and debate on the adjustment challenges of immigrant children is limited but growing (Mather, 2009, Onchwari, Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008, McCarthy, 1998). There is little disputing the assertion that the educational well-being of immigrant children and youth will directly affect their future participation and involvement in the economic, social, and political affairs of their communities (Xin Ma, 2003). This position calls for an understanding of the educational and psychosocial challenges that confront them and their consequences as they struggle to adjust to a new culture, a new community, and often, a new language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent History of Immigration to the United States

Millions of people from different countries have immigrated to the United States over the past 200 years seeking freedom, peace, prosperity, financial stability, and/or enhancement of their education. Until the 1960s, the vast majority of newcomers to the U.S. came from Europe. Literature on these immigrations suggests that in the 16th and 17th centuries the majority of immigrants came from England and parts of Northern Europe (Miller, 2009). This was followed by arrivals from a greater variety of countries in the Eastern and Southern

European regions. Miller (2009) again emphasizes that; Although immigrants today are more diverse than ever before, arrive from an extremely wide variety of countries, and bring with them an extraordinary range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, in the last 50 years the great majority of them have come from Latin America and Asia (p. 2). There have also been waves of immigration from other regions of the world as a consequence of U.S. immigration policies. Pong (2003) quoting Martin and Midgley (1994) and Kent and Mather (2002) point out that since 1965 when immigration was liberalized the number of foreign-born immigrants has quadrupled and their countries of origin has shifted from Europe to Latin America and Asia. Over half of these foreign based immigrants come from Latin America and a further quarter from Asia. Miller (2009), citing data from U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (2000) and U. S. Census Bureau (2004) indicate that:

The number of immigrants who entered this country between 1951 and 1960 reached 2.5 million (Immigration and Naturalization Services, 2000) in the year 2000, these numbers rose to 28.4 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). In 2003, 11.7% of the U.S. population, or 33.5 million people, were foreign-born (U.S. Census Bureau). By 2006, the foreign- born population increased to 37.5 million and became 12.5% of the U.S. population (pp. 2-3). The significant rise in immigration as well as high birth rates among immigrant groups have also resulted in the dramatic growth in the population of immigrant children in the United States. The population of first- and second-generation immigrant children, which is now about one-quarter (18.7 million) of all U.S. children, is believed to have grown by 51% between 1995 and 2014 (Child Trends Data Bank, October 2014).

Emigration from Sub-Saharan Africa to the US

The history of Black African immigration to the United States is a long one. However, whereas in earlier times it was largely one of forced immigration, much voluntary immigration from Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, in particular can be traced to the 1980s (Zong & Batalova, 2014; Caps, McCabe & Fix, 2012). According to Caps et al (2012), Black Africans who are "among the fastest-growing groups of US immigrants" (p. 1), have on the whole done better on integration indicators. In 2013, and in the specific case of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa, they took up 4 percent of the 41.3 million immigrants to the United States, and also accounted for 82 percent of the 1.8 million immigrants born in Africa (Zong & Batalova, 2014). Out of this number of immigrants, 10 percent were under 18 years. The growth in African immigration to the US has also led to increasing research interest in the welfare of African immigrant children (Chacko, 2003; Obeng, 2007; Venters and Ganny, 2009). While this is welcoming, Thomas (2012), takes note of gaps that exist in the literature on the educational profile and attainment of African immigrants stressing "that little is known about the ways in which their schooling outcomes are influenced by factors such as language proficiency, age at arrival, and family characteristics, and whether the influences of these factors vary across race" (p. 2).

Needs of Immigrant Children

While considerable research has gone into the study of how adult immigrants adjust to the new societies they emigrate to, there seem to be limited debate, research and a dearth of literature on the adjustment of immigrant children in such new environments. Immigrant children are an under-researched yet a steadily growing group (Mather, 2009, Onchwari, Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008, McCarthy, 1998). Little is known about the adaptation process that these children must navigate, or the educational and psychosocial challenges that

confront them and their consequences as they struggle to adjust to a new culture, a new community, and often, a new language. The educational well-being of immigrant children and youth directly affects their future participation and involvement in the economic, social, and political affairs of their communities (Xin Ma, 2003). Miller (2009) indicates that "immigrants face a variety of stressors and many times suffer traumatic events throughout their lives" (p. 8). These stressors according to McCarthy (1998) may result from "leaving a familiar social context and extended family network, from entering a new place, culture, and language, or from harsh conditions endured before or during the transitional journey" (p. 3). Many such children struggle to establish and re-establish themselves – redefining their roles within their families and the new society they have transited into. Vernez (1996) points out that immigrant children face a broad array of "special" educational needs and circumstances. McCarthy (1998) indicates that "the educational and psychosocial challenges faced by immigrant children in the United States today – English language acquisition, cultural and psychosocial adjustment, and for some, the effects of limited formal education – are undoubtedly complex and interconnected" (p. 9).

The challenge of learning a new language is a formidable obstacle that immigrant children must overcome. Mastery in both spoken and written English can assure the children of success in the educational mainstream and brighten their chances of after graduation employment. Pre-existing English language knowledge has been linked to easier assimilation and more positive educational experiences at least for first generation immigrants (Rumbaut, 1997). Rumbaut (1997a) further points out that the capacity for English language acquisition is age-related and that such capacity is especially enhanced between ages three and early teens when such learners can gain proficiency without an accent. Those who immigrate after puberty may learn but will be left with a lingering accent. The success in acquiring proficiency is more the task of the school, a task that can be made easier if parents also have some proficiency and can support the school effort. To McCarthy (1998);

The school environment, and the norms, values, and support offered there, plays an important role in facilitating language acquisition and adaptation in the broader sense, especially for the children who arrive with the least familiarity with the prevailing culture and language (p. 10).Immigrant children are also confronted with the challenge of leaving their home countries and environment. Such young immigrants leave behind all that is already familiar to them - language, culture, community, and a social system. The additional trauma of leaving one or both parents behind, finding enough food and shelter, and the fear of being deported, bear hard on this young immigrants (James, 1997; Castex, 1997). Another challenge that results in emotional stress for immigrant children is the choice they are often forced to make between their parents' culture and the mainstream culture they are exposed to in school. Sam (1992) notes:

Growing up in a society where their parents' values apply to a minority group, these children can experience an acute sense of shame in practicing their parents' culture in a society where mainstream people have different values and norms. Nevertheless, to reject their parents and their norms can be painful and result in extreme emotional problems. The child may experience guilt feelings, anxiety, and loneliness. On the other hand, rejecting the society and taking sides with the parents may also create another form of loneliness – alienation….Inability to integrate different cultural norms and values, with the child impelled to choose (or reject) sides, makes the maintenance of the ego identity difficult and the child susceptible to identity disorders (cited in McCarthy 1998, p.12). As a means of resolving this Garcia-Coll & Magnuson (1997) argue for the adoption of bi-cultural competence by

immigrant children, adolescents, and adults. This is the ability to comfortably and capably interact and navigate in both ethnic and mainstream cultures. Another interesting dimension to this living within two cultures is the tension that goes on within immigrant families. McCarthy (1998) reiterates the literature's emphasis that for better or for worse, immigration is a family affair, and that the greatest struggles and problems seem to occur within the family unit. Intergenerational conflicts are exacerbated by the fact that adolescents and their parents acculturate at different rates and what they want for themselves may be different from what their parents want for them (James, 1997). Immigrant children are also confronted with the challenge of prejudice. McCarthy (1998) again comments that: The impact of discrimination and racial prejudice on the adaptation of immigrant children, especially the very young, has been a historically neglected issue and is now being recognized as crucial both for theoretical understanding of and behavioral intervention with immigrant children (p. 15). The period of adjustment to mainstream society is also a period where immigrant children have to deal with varied forms of racial prejudice and discrimination (James, 1997).

Theories of Assimilation

Duque-Páramo (2004) has observed that assimilation has emerged as a central concept to define and study the processes by which immigrants are incorporated into US society. Citing Fernández-Kelly and Schauffler (1994), she explains that the concept designates not only the range of adjustments to the receiving environments, the ways in which immigrants survive, and the manner in which they blend into larger societies, but also discloses the hopes and expectations about how immigrants "should" behave. Classical assimilation theory has dominated the sociological literature and has been employed throughout the last century to explain immigration. According to Zhou (1997), this theory assumes that there is a natural process by which diverse ethnic groups come to share a common culture and to gain equal access to the opportunity structure of society. This process consists of gradually deserting old cultural and behavioral patterns in favor of new ones, and that once set in motion, this process moves inevitably and irreversibly toward assimilation. In other words, in order to gain access to mainstream society and move "out of the margins," immigrants gradually over generations lose their cultural and socio-cultural distinctiveness and "melt" into the American society. This is thus a linear or classic *straight-line assimilation model*, which depicts immigrants becoming more "American" over the generations, or with the length of residence in the U.S. (Pong, 2003).

Several researchers have criticized the classical assimilation theory pointing out that its prediction that differences between ethnic groups upon arrival would even out over time and result in similar educational and occupational patterns does not seem to fully occur in reality (Zhou 1997). Other criticisms of aspects of the theory especially the fact that differences have been found among different immigrant groups, have drawn questions about its universal application as a theory of immigration (Zhou, 1997a, 1997b; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). In the face of these criticisms McCarthy (1998) comments that the "classical assimilation theory is insufficient as an explanation for the complexity of societal forces and for the anomaly of individual outcomes as immigrant children and groups take root in their new environments" (p. 23). It must be pointed out that the criticism of the classical assimilation theory is not universal though. Alba and Nee (1997) put up a passionate defense of the theory pointing out that in spite of some deficiencies of earlier formulations and applications of assimilation the "concept offers the best way to understand and describe the integration into the mainstream across generations by many individuals and ethnic groups, even if it cannot be regarded as a universal outcome of American life" (p. 827).

Basing their argument on an earlier definition of assimilation by Park and Burgess (1921), who defined it as "a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experiences and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life" (cited in Alba & Nee, 1997). Premising their position on what this definition implies, these scholars argue that assimilation does not propose the erasure of all signs of ethnic origins as the theory's opponents tend to harp on. Instead assimilation can be seen as a process that brings ethnic minorities into the mainstream of American social life. Assimilation then, according to Park's legacy which Alba and Nee (1997) passionately subscribe to, must be seen as the end stage of a "race-relations cycle of contact, competition, accommodation, and eventual assimilation" (p. 828). Whatever the position one takes in this debate, other variations of this classical theory have been proposed to make sense of immigration and integration into the receiving society.

Proponents of segmented assimilation, an alternative framework (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Chun & Mobley, 2014), consider adaptation outcomes as segmented. This adaptation could be "either confinement to permanent underclass memberships or rapid economic advancement with deliberate preservation of the immigrant values" (Zhou, 1997, p. 75). The benefit of immigration for the immigrant youth is dependent on the segment of the society into which they assimilate. This framework argues that the disparate contexts into which immigrant groups are received influences their level of social mobility and adaptation. Scholars subscribing to this framework believe the perspective addresses what makes certain groups more susceptible to a downward spiral into poverty, while other ethnic groups are able to avoid this marginalization. To Zhou (1997), the major determinants of vulnerability include racial stratification, economic opportunities, financial and social capital upon arrival, family structure, community organization, and cultural patterns of social factors.

METHODOLOGY

Choice of Narrative Study

Hendry (2007), characterizes narrative research "as providing a method for telling stories," giving voice to those traditionally marginalized, and providing a less exploitative research method than other modes" (p. 490). My rationale for choosing this research method was strengthened by the assertion that it "focuses on studying a single person, gathering data through the collection of stories, reporting individual experiences, and discussing the meaning of those experiences for the individual" (Creswell, 2012, p. 502), and therefore was best suited for this study. Indeed, the credibility of narrative inquiry as a reliable valuable research approach has gained currency (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Riessman, 2008; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Moen (2006) mentions three claims that form the basis of narrative research in a study of the literature. The literature claims that:

Human beings organize their experiences of the world into narratives. Second, narrative researchers maintain that the stories that are told depend on the individual's past and present experiences, her or his values, the people the stories are being told to, the addressees, and when and where they are being told. The third claim, closely connected to the second, concerns the 'multi-voicedness' that occurs in the narratives (p. 5). In narrative research, researchers describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about people's lives, and write narratives of individual experiences. As a distinct form of qualitative research, a narrative inquiry typically focuses on studying a single person, gathering data through the

collection of stories, reporting individual experiences, and discussing the meaning of those experiences for the individual. In my view this approach as it provides the opportunity to listen to the story of a young immigrant growing through the process of adjustment in a small town in Michigan, USA.

Data Collection and Recording

I employed the narrative approach of qualitative research to describe the adjustment experiences of an immigrant student to schooling in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Data was acquired through a 60 minute interview conducted by the researcher with the express consent of the parents of the participant, who although was over 18 years still lived in the family apartment. An interview protocol was employed to collect the data. This instrument had ten (10) questions that were flexible enough to allow for creative inquiry into the narrative story of the participant. The consent of participant was also sought in order to ensure an audio recording of the interview. To avoid unnecessary distraction during interviewing and to ensure confidentiality, the process was conducted at the participant's home and in a secured environment with only the interviewer and the interviewee present. This also encouraged rapport and provided a context where power was diffused and not concentrated on the researcher. I also took detailed field notes that were designed based on ideas from Whiting, Child and Lambert (1966) and on experience gathered from an earlier interview conducted for a class exercise. The field note described the place and time of the interview, interactions between the researcher and the participant, people at home during the interview, and the physical setting of the interview. Records of the interview were kept confidential in a secured folder on my laptop. I chose a pseudonym, (Kofi), for the participant to disguise his identity.

Data Analysis

In brief, the interview yielded data on the following: schooling before arrival in the United States, reasons for coming to the United States, initial challenges adjusting to school, making friends and their support, involvement in co-curricular activities, family support, and improvement in school grades. The analysis started with a process of data reduction based essentially on the primary research questions. In vivo and process coding methods were employed in the coding process. The coding was manually done after the interview had been transcribed using the Sony Digital Voice Editor Version 3.2. The responses of the respondent were simplified through this process and memos were written to convey my observations.

Narrative Structure of Study

In this narrative, I have attempted to present the participant's voice and perspectives and have avoided any temptation to interpret. I recognize though, that I am part of the method as a qualitative researcher, and also because I had temporarily relocated to the United States (with my family) to study. I took cognizance that this reconstruction of the young immigrant's story may be mediated by my own reality. I, however, tried to convey the participant's story in his own words and relied on direct quotes in a number of situations where I considered that the narrative will be better presented by doing so. Kofi's adjustment story could be described in three significant stages: the pre-arrival stage, the early arrival stage, and the late arrival stage.

Pre-Arrival Stage

This is the stage that describes the immediate period before his arrival in the United States with his parents in 2005. Kofi describes school as being fun especially when he looked forward to going on recess to play. He also described the down side of school when one was given corporal punishment. He describes this experience in these words:

Well you know, I just went to school. They taught you and everything. I was the class captain back then. What I remember the most is that you got whipped when you got into trouble. We had to wear uniforms because I was in a private school.

Kofi further explained that the family had to relocate to the United States because of his father's desire to pursue further education. Not much was done by his parents to prepare his mind for the drastic change he was about to experience. Indeed, he seemed to have had very interesting preconceived ideas about life in the place that was to become his home for a long while. He remarks; "I didn't really know a lot. It was a place where everybody was rich. There were no hardships here. But found out differently once I came". His surprise about the reality on the ground was quite obvious.

Early Arrival Stage

This stage could be described as the period between his arrival in the United States and the first year. Kofi summarized his beginning experiences in school in the following words:

Once I came, they just introduced me to the class. I didn't really talk much. Because I didn't know anybody. I was really basically to myself all the time. The first years I did not talk to anybody a lot. It was when I got home that I talked to my family. I didn't really communicate much.

Kofi found the challenges at this stage in school difficult. According to him, he communicated very little in school and only found comfort at home and after school. He attributed his inability to communicate in school more to shyness than problems with his accent. I am able to relate to the two situations described above even as an adult immigrant. As an adult learner from a background that is completely different from the one I encountered. As I sat through my classes in the first few weeks after my arrival to study in the US, I was not particularly shy but my confidence was shaken. I had to go out of my way to speak slowly to enable others understand me. I was not sure of how things were done and it took me a while to relate to my course mates. He also had challenges with penmanship because he had apparently not learned this in his earlier school experience. His description of the situation was insightful:

Well, when I first came everybody was writing in cursive. There was the understanding that everybody had to write in cursive and I had no idea how to write it. So one of my teachers… she sat me down and gave me all the books and all these writing materials to learn how to write in cursive and once I got the hung of it, I got to do it.

According to Kofi, it took him "say probably the whole year to actually get good at it". What is interesting though is the assistance the teacher gave to enable him overcome this hurdle. Another significant development during this stage of adjustment was the challenge of making friends. The participant intimated that it took him a whole year to develop real close

friendship with somebody who was a fellow immigrant child and lived close to his family apartment. He pointed out though that after this he made some American friends and seem to have related well with them. In an attempt at finding out the level of intimacy which could be gauged from his getting invited to his friends' homes, Kofi said:

I don't really go out much, you know. If I went out it was just around where I lived and I don't really get invited to people's houses and I wasn't really interested in doing that….

Kofi also had to adjust to the new food culture in the school cafeteria during this period. He did not seem to have had any difficulty adjusting to eating in the cafeteria. Once he watched what others did at the cafeteria in order not to "*make mistakes*" and once the food was not in conflict with his religious beliefs, he did fine. His attempt at avoiding mistakes at the cafeteria indicated a strong desire to conform. The participant also credits parental support for helping his adjustment from the very beginning when it was most needed. The parents were always interested in finding out about his academic progress and how life was at school. Their support was also seen in the willingness to provide money for all school functions and school trips. His sister who was in a higher grade also provided valuable academic support. Kofi commenting on the sister's help said:

Because with her knowledge I could go to her with any of the questions I had about class because she already took them. So that helped me a lot. The teachers knew my sister so when they see the last name they are like so that is your sister and I say oh yeah…

This stage also saw the beginning of the participant's involvement in co-curricular activities. He joined a singing group in the fourth grade and also participated in some sports.

Late Arrival Stage

Involvement in additional co-curricular activities also provided good opportunities for Kofi's adjustment. He extended his interest in sports which had started in the elementary school to the high school. He actively engaged in sports from the 7th grade when he was allowed to play basketball, to his junior year in high school. He explains in his own words how beneficial this involvement was for his adjustment:

Well, I think what it did is it got me to meet like a lot of people. Because a lot of people are interested in these things and also to make friends that way and also you will be able to get closer to people and learn more about them that way.

Describing further the additional benefits of this involvement to an immigrant, Kofi said:

Because when you come in you do not want to be by yourself. You don't want to be a loner and not talk to anybody. It's hard to approach somebody and start talking to them when you are a loner. The best thing is to try join sports. Because once you join it you become a team and once you are in a team everybody who joins the team usually associates with you and you could get friends that way.

Besides making lots of friends he notes that sports helped to improve his self-image and self-confidence. These are vital especially for this stage of development as an adolescent transiting to young adulthood and also for an immigrant struggling to fit into his new environment. This stage also saw the gradual improvement in his overall grades. He

attributed this to two things. The first was his parents' insistence that his continuing involvement in sports was dependent on improvement in his school grades. The second was the effective management of his time. He explained in these words:

I managed my time wisely because my parents told me that if I didn't keep up my grades I couldn't be in sports and I was able to keep up my grades and still be in sports. I learned to balance things out.

The respondent also made a general observation on adjustment and the improvement of school grades. He situated his comment in a discussion he had had earlier with a colleague on the subject and the general trend that seem to occur with most immigrant students. He explained:

I think that's what happens to mostly all of them. Because this girl the other day I was talking to about some of the stuff we did back in elementary. Because of how our writing was and how little simple things we didn't know. But as time goes on and you don't get good grades, you realize that you need to pick it up. The moment you start getting adjusted you know what to do with this and what not to do with this. I think that's what happens to mostly all of them.

When asked to indicate the greatest factor in his success in adjusting to his new environment and schooling, Kofi had this to say:

I think my friends that I hang out with now played a major role because we being together since elementary and we go to school up to this time. So our friendship and the bond that we created helped a lot because when you come here you need find a group to fit in and somebody…people to hang out with all the time. I think it has played a major factor because if I didn't have many friends and close bonds with people, I don't think I will have a lot of my successes. Even in school when you need something you go to them and they help you out. When they need something they will come to you. So I think friendship is really the key.

To him, such friends provided academic and social support and opportunities for bonding that were so vital at this stage of his adjustment. Elaborating further, and in response to a question on any additional source of support in the process of adjustment, Kofi noted that teachers provided support as and when approached for help. However, he was not offered any special treatment and attention as an immigrant in school. Kofi was further asked to share his view on whether the "smallness" of Berrien Springs and the size of his school were contributory factors to his seemingly smooth adjustment. He affirmed this view by saying:

The size is really important. If I had gone to a school in Chicago I wouldn't even see anyone. There is a lot of people it will be like I'm lost everywhere I go. This place is the most culturally diverse school around this area. It really helps because we are not big and we are not too small.

As the interview concluded I asked Kofi to share some advice with immigrant students borne out of his own adjustment experiences. This was what he had to say:

The first is for the person to find a friend as soon as possible. Find somebody you could trust to talk about anything with. If you get that kind of friendship and close bonds with that person and you are in the same school and you could go through all challenges together, it really

helps. Because you could go to them for anything you want because my friends helped me a lot. Friendship is really important.

He said further that:

Getting yourself involved and if there is something that goes on in the school and anything like that its best to get involved if you can. Because you get to know things instead of everyday you just wake up go to school then come back home. [66]When you get yourself involved in stuff you begin to learn more about other things – what this is and what that is. It gives you more knowledge.

These comments in essence summed up the experiences of this immigrant student who arrived in the United States, was placed in the 4th grade and who has successfully completed high school.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data from this interview has revealed six significant themes that have implications in the important task of helping immigrant students adjust to schooling. First, it is important for parents to prepare the minds of the young people before they immigrate (to the United States and elsewhere) as this will wean them off unrealistic expectations, prepare their young minds to deal with the challenges ahead, and avoid the evidence in the literature that suggest that residential mobility does have some initial adverse effect on the social adjustment and the emotional wellbeing of the immigrant child (Kantor, 1969; Schaller 1972a; Schaller 1972b, cited in Aronowitz, 1984). Second, parental/family support is vital as young immigrants deal with the challenges that confront them in school. When parents are able to provide academic, emotional and financial support to their children during this transitional stage, it helps in their early adaptation. Immigration is always a complex and challenging process for immigrant children (especially adolescents) who do not yet have the emotional and cognitive coping skills that adults have to deal with the stressors that come with immigration. According to Van Geel and Veeder (2009), "constructing a positive ethnic identity, dealing with prejudice and discrimination and dealing with different expectations from the family and the new society may cause considerable stress" (p. 1).

Van Geel and Veeder (2009), point to recent research that suggests that "immigrant adolescents have been found to perform academically as well or even better than their national contemporaries on many forms of adaptation despite a lower socio economic status" (p. 187). However, this changes with subsequent generations. This phenomenon has been referred to as the 'immigrant paradox' and has been observed typically in the U.S. and Canada (Hayes-Bautista 2004; Garcia-Coll 2005, in Van Geel & Veeder, 2009). Van Geel and Veeder (2009) again reference a study by Harris (2000) conducted among 20,000 immigrant adolescents in the United States. This study found out that "first and second generation immigrant adolescents were less likely to engage in delinquent and violent acts, to use drugs or alcohol, and were less likely to be in poor health than national adolescents" (p. 187). This tends to be in agreement with Tung-mala (1999) whose study concluded that factors such the immigrant students' attitudes, parental expectations, and home culture have significant effects on the academic success of immigrant students in the US, regardless of socioeconomic background. What is interesting to note is that whereas the academic success of some immigrant students could be attributed to the level of education of parents in the home countries and their SES status, it could generally be said that regardless of SES of

families many immigrant students tend to come from families that are strongly supportive of achievement. This fact is seen in the Kofi's family. The family was supportive of his school achievement and tended to provide moral and material support to ensure his success. Third, the making of friends at an early stage of the transition provides emotional, social and academic support. Being able to feel 'part of the crowd' is necessary as children tend to spend more time in school and learn most social and academic skills from friends and peers. Peers greatly shape the social, emotional, and cognitive development of all children and may be particularly important in the case of immigrant children because it is often the reception of peers that determine the extent to which such children thrive. Fourth, support from teachers and counselors are vital for any adjustment. It is easy for struggling immigrant children to be lost in the crowd and thus receive very little support. Teachers and counselors can help relieve the stressors that come with the task of adjustment by designing special bridging programs for students (McCarthy, 1998). Onchwari et al. (2003) reiterating the currently under researched fact of immigrant children, advices the necessity of understanding the challenges these children encounter in their adjustment in school in order to better serve them. These writers suggest six theories that not exhaustive, could be employed in the classroom in an attempt at understanding immigrant children and their learning needs. These theories are: Maslow's Needs Hierarchy, Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Erikson's psychosocial theory, Piaget's cognitive theory, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model.

Supporting their position from the research literature Onchwari et al. (2003) suggest that the teacher and the school could do the following: demonstrate sensitivity to children's struggles and the challenges in their families, learn about children's culture and teach acceptance, communicate clearly and enhance the communication skills of immigrant children, create opportunities to connect with each of these children and demonstrate interest in them as individuals, ask children and parents things they would want to learn more about and try to support that, and teach parents how they can have communication with their children daily once they leave school. Kofi, the respondent, intimated that whereas the teachers were willing to help as and when he needed such help, there seem not to have been any intentionally thought program to help him and other immigrant students who probably needed more help to enable them adjust comfortably. Fifth, the importance of co-curricular or out of class activities especially sports can open opportunities for interaction and friendships for immigrant children. Such children need encouragement and support to increase their willingness and involvement in these.

Lastly, grade improvement poses initial challenge and the process tends to be gradual even though the pace may not be the same for all students. Again, students need a lot of support to enable them keep pace and not fall through the cracks. Achieving well in school has been variously explained. Why do some immigrant children achieve in school (as Kofi seem to have done), and others do not? According to McCarthy (1998), two main reasons have been offered in the research. The first focuses on the role of the immigrant family and individual characteristics as determinants of academic success or failure. The second emphasizes the differential treatment of minority immigrant groups by the host society. It is interesting to note that both positions offer interesting explanations for divergent school performance patterns. McCarthy's (1998) summary of the literature on the subject is insightful, as he identifies five theories/models that focus on individual and family characteristics as important determinants of academic success or failure (the cultural discontinuity theory; low-socioeconomic status theory; cultural ecological model; role of immigrant parents' model; and genetic or inborn characteristics of individuals' model) and the factors that determine an

immigrant child's academic success including; age upon arrival, length of residence in the United States, and grade level entry in United States schools.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study and although the findings, discussion and recommendations may be applicable to other similar situations any such attempt at doing so must be done with the following in mind. First, the absence of a personal journal by the participant made the recall of events that had occurred earlier on in his adjustment experience very difficult. The participant had arrived in the United States in the 4th grade and this interview was conducted immediately after his high school graduation. The complete reliance on the memory reduced the complete authenticity of the account and denied the narrative of some likely interesting experiences. Second, a longitudinal study that tracked the participant from the very beginning of the immigration experience to a specific point in time would have been most appropriate. One fact that emerged from this interview and an earlier one done in preparation for the current study indicated that the intensity of the adjustment process tended to be concentrated within the first two years. This would have ensured focus and depth in the study. It is recommended that any future study could track immigrant students from the very first day of the arrival in the country and encourage the detailing of such experiences in a personal diary.

Three, this study relied solely on the self-reporting account of the interviewee. No interviews were conducted with teachers and counselors and as already mentioned there were no recorded accounts. Any future study could include these other sources to create a composite picture of the immigrant student experience. Fourth, even though the focus of the study was on one specific immigrant child (from West Africa), some future studies could examine this experience in terms of gender as well as immigrants from other areas of the world. This is because the literature seems to indicate that the adjustment experiences of immigrants are varied according to country of origin, education and the SES of parents, and the place/location of settlement in the United States. Last, the fact that the study is limited to Berrien Springs (Michigan, USA), should be considered in extending the current findings and recommendations.

CONCLUSIONS

McCarthy (1998) reviewing the literature on the adaptation of immigrant children in the United States has suggested the need to explore individual, group, and external forces at work in the families, communities, and schools where immigrant children are finding their places and building the foundation for their futures. I identify with McCarthy's conclusions and emphasize that efforts to design appropriate, efficient, and effective interventions to support immigrant children will depend upon a comprehensive theoretical and practical understanding of the challenges facing immigrant children, as well as careful analysis of the practices and policies that have been implemented to date. As the United States legally and illegally attract migrants the special needs of immigrant children and the challenge of helping them adjust to their new culture will be a recurring feature. The literature seems to indicate varied ways of adjustment and offers increasing opportunities for further research in this rather complex area of study.

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