Immigrant children's construction of their identity: The case of African children

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the children of African immigrants construct their identity in the United States. The U.S. immigration policies allowing citizens of foreign countries to migrate into the country, have favored the immigration of many Africans into the country. Many of those immigrants experience challenges ranging from language and economic issues to social and cultural integration. The challenges are more accrued for the children who have to juggle between their cultural backgrounds reinforced at home and the values available in their new cultural and social environment. While there is a large body of literature dealing with issues of identity faced by immigrant children in general and English language learners in particular, the case of African children has remained unexplored. Because of the linguistic diversity in African countries, most of the children spoke at least one language other than English before immigration, they do not always have the space to practice it as their languages and cultures are marginalized both at school and in the society. In this paper, I investigate the following questions: To what extent are African children familiar with their social and cultural backgrounds? How do children identify themselves? What are the factors that impact on the children's identity? To which extent do parents influence their children's identification of the self?

Keywords: Immigrants, students' identity, African students, English language learners.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores issues regarding African immigrant children's construction of their social and cultural identity in the United States. It shows an interest in how French speaking African immigrant children display issues regarding their identity at a tutorial program organized for immigrant children. The student participants in this study are all African born children whose parents immigrated in the United States at the favor of the diversity visa lottery organized once a year by the US Department of State. The diversity visa lottery is a raffle that authorizes the immigration of the winners to the U.S and grants them permanent residency and possible naturalization should the immigrant decide to petition after five years of continued residency. Most of the African visa lottery immigrants in the United States migrate either for educational purposes or in hope for a better life (Arthur, 2000). Many of them, especially those coming from non-

English speaking countries, experience linguistic barriers that weaken their immediate professional and economic ambitions. These barriers also constrain their prospect for social and cultural integration. The challenges are more accrued for their children who have to juggle between their cultural backgrounds, reinforced at home, and the norms and values of their new cultural and social spaces.

Most of the French speaking African born immigrant children speak at least two languages in their home country before immigration; those being their native language and the French language that has been imposed to most of them in school and to others through their parents. However, after immigration, the use of those languages as well as their social cultural background is reduced to a strict minimum at the favor of the English language and their new cultural environment. This paper investigates how a tutorial program helps

immigrant children deal with the marginalization of their social, cultural, and linguistic background from school. It explores the extent to which the French speaking African immigrant children remain familiar with their pre-immigration cultural and linguistic background.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

From a postcolonial perspective, the issues faced by English language learners (ELLs) symbolize the complex relationship between the Orient and the Occident, the East and the West, which according to Said (1979) is a "relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony" (p. 5). As they originate from different cultural and linguistic settings, African immigrants are expected to acquire the mainstream linguistic baggage that incorporates the cultural norms. Thus, they undergo the uneven exchange of political, intellectual, and cultural power between the two worlds (Said, 1979).

Bhabha (1994) views cultural difference as a "complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation" (Bhabha, 1994:3). Several historical settings including the cultural imperialism exercised by European countries during colonization influenced the cultural capital of ELLs. Another influence on their cultural background is their post-immigration experiences. Immigration renders more complicated their sense of belonging and position them in what Bhabha refers to as "in-between space". He argues that in the "in-between space" "space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (p. 2). Hence, the immigrant child can no longer identify himself or herself solely in relation to his cultural and linguistic background. He instead is part of a hybrid cultural space in which "the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with newness that is not part of past and present" (p. 10).

Bhabha's notion echoes Victor Turner's categorization of the ritual stages in the rite of passage that include a stage of separation, a liminal stage (also known the between-and-betwixt position), and a stage of reaggregation (Turner, 1967). One could speculate that the dynamics between teachers and ELLs occur at the luminal stage where the neophyte's, that is, the ELL's identity is blurred. Therefore, if the transition is not negotiated with care, there might be little hope for a smooth reintegration, if any. In fact, the social structure of communities form in which hierarchy and inequality is believed to dissolve during the luminal stage does not apply with ELLs, granted that they operate within an ambiguous frame of mainstream and non-mainstream reality.

Portes (1999) establishes a relationship between the culture of origin and school performance of immigrant children and argues that they experience challenges that

are often different from the challenges endured by minority groups. They "may encounter language difficulties and suffer discrimination" (p. 491). He however points out that they are more motivated for academic achievement. He notes that "students from these groups [immigrants] tend to be more optimistic in succeeding in U.S. society and enjoy greater family support than involuntary group students" (p. 492). But his findings did not establish a connection between the cultures of origin of the immigrant students and their school performance, although he reports, that cultural membership affects achievement.

Cohen (1970) also looks at the marginalization of the immigrants' culture and language in public schools. He reveals that the children of 1st generation immigrants did not generally do well in school and attributes that low achievement to the parental status and the value accorded to school as well as the schools' culture. He also emphasizes that "there is no evidence of any effort to employ the immigrants' language and culture as educational vehicle" (p. 26). The failure to incorporate the immigrants' culture might constitute a hindrance to the children as they suddenly lose control of their cultural identity. Admittedly, Portes (1999) points to the culture of origin and ethnicity as an explaining factor of the successful school performance of some immigrant students. Hence, the culture of origin becomes a compelling element to consider in the education of immigrant children.

Shabaya (2006) researched issues relevant to the children of African immigrants and observed that they must adapt into their new society, adjust to their new school, language, and culture. They also have some special educational needs and face an emotional stress. She finds that children from English speaking countries adapt easier than those from non-English speaking countries who must learn the language. Even those from English speaking countries, however, are confronted to issues related to their accent. She considers the multiplicity, the diversity, and the specificity of the African languages that these children know, and American teachers' awareness of those languages, to view language as an essential factor to academic achievement. She suggests ESL as the most effective way to teach English to the children of African immigrants.

Alidou (2000) makes the same argument of diversity of English when she attributes the poor achievement of immigrant children to "linguiscism" which she describes as "the ideology and structure that is used to legitimize, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power as well as resources between groups. It is based on the devaluation of one's linguistic heritage (p. 2)." According to Alidou, "linguiscism" is reflected through the lack of consideration of the student's academic and linguistic proficiency as well as his/her social background when enrolling him/her in the appropriate grade level. She also indicates that linguiscism is "reflected in the refusal of

schools to acknowledge the varieties of English that exists in the U.S. and globally" (p. 2).

For instance, Rong and Fitchett (2008) compare issues regarding immigrant Asian youth to Black immigrants from the Caribbean and argues that working-class immigrants make a more difficult transition to the U.S. educational system. The authors observe that working class Black immigrants tend to identify to African American and undergo the pressure to avoid "acting White" (p. 38). Middle class Black immigrant youth, on the other hand, are more likely to identify to their ethnic and national identities. Identically, Portes and McLeod (1996) investigated the extent to which Hispanic immigrant students identify to their ethnic identity and pointed the finger at socio-economic status as a factor. Contrary to Rong and Fitchett's findings, Portes and McLeod found that "respondents from immigrant communities of higher average socio-economic status and longer US residence are more prone to shy away from the pan-ethnic label beamed to them from the mainstream" (p. 534).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study site and participants

This study took place at a tutorial program organized for the children of refugees and immigrants in the United States. The program rented a room from a church and was held once a week for 3 hours. The students attending the program were mostly Vietnamese and Congolese. The Congolese children were fluent in French and Lingala prior to immigration. The study, however, focused on thirty (30) Congolese children who were all in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. They were all in elementary schools and had spent a maximum of three years in the U.S.

The tutors were on the other hand all native English speakers and Caucasians, at the exception of one Asian American and one Nigerian American. They were mostly college students, members of sororities and fraternities fulfilling annual community volunteer service requirements of their houses. Pseudonyms are used to identify the participants discussed in this paper.

Data collection

The methodological tools used to collect data for this paper were direct observations and interviews through an immersion in the lived experience of informants (Emerson et al., 1995). Four observation sessions were conducted for three hours each time over a period of five weeks to observe thirty (30) children and ten (10) tutors. As for the interviews, they included four tutors, three parents, five children, and the Director of the program. The respondents were chosen on the basis of a judgment and

purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2017). The students interviewed were actively involved in the different activities of the tutorial program. The three parents are those of the students interviewed and the four tutors interacted very often with the students interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted from 20 to 40 min each.

Data analysis procedure

The data analysis procedure for this paper is inductive. Patton (1990) discusses inductive analysis as a process in which the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis "emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis." (p. 390) The analysis is grounded into the observation and interview data and consisted in identifying and analyzing emerging themes.

FINDINGS

The issues regarding the immigrant children's construction of their identity are the focus of this section. The data collected is analyzed within the frame of cultural and linguistic activities. As far as the cultural activities are concerned, they display the linguistic challenges of the children in writing English as well as their quest to distance themselves from their cultural background and adopt their American surroundings. The tutorial program organized a poster activity in which each immigrant child was expected to make a poster about his home country with the assistance of a tutor.

The finished posters included pictures of the kids, their names, their countries and some drawings of houses, maps of country of origin or flags. The most common information provided by the children was relative to the weather and food. For instance, one of the children, a 3rd grader, wrote "In Congo, school wear uniforms. It was very hot and the ground was covered with sand. We ate rice with vegetables, fruits and meat. Even when it rained it was still hot. There are bugs that make you sick, so sometimes we put nets on our beds." Kevin wrote "I am from Africa, Congo. I am 6 years old. I moved here aloing long time ago in 2006. There was a flixing cars and there was false hawsis and a king in the fansy houses." As for Diane (3rd grade), she wrote that "the weather is very hot in the Congo. People like sports especially soccer."

Some of the children, however, had a difficult time coming up with ideas about their home country. It was the case of Jonas who struggled with his poster ideas despite the assistance of his tutors with a diversity of questions. The questions were about the city and neighborhood in which he lived in Congo, the language(s) spoken, the food, and clothes, etc. But Jonas was not able to answer most of those questions. He told his tutor, "my country is Congo and I speak French and Lingala in Congo." He

also added "My mother cooked a lot of rice in Congo. I like rice a lot." The tutor finally picked up a book talking about the Congo and had Jonas read it.

During the interviews, Jonas' parents revealed that "He (Jonas) does not know much about his country of origin. He was very young when we moved here and does not remember anything from home." His mother added "I try to talk to him about his country, but you know… he is not interested. He prefers watching television and playing games." As for Jonas, he mentioned that he does not have many African friends. His friends at school are African Americans. He said "my friends are African Americans. They speak English that helps me speak English better."

Another striking activity observed was soccer. The director of the program once invited the tutors and their students to walk outside to the soccer field. On the soccer field, the boys played soccer with both male and female tutors. Near the soccer field, were the girls playing hop-scotch with a female tutor and Alain, one of the boys was watching them. A few minutes later, he walks back to the tutorial room were his older sister was still working on her homework and told her "they are playing a silly game outside' a tutor asked him 'you don't like soccer?' He responded, 'I hate soccer'. Tutor asked, 'what do you like?' he said, "basket-ball." I later asked him why he thought soccer was a silly game and he responded that none of his friends play that at school. According to him, his friends played basket-ball and American football. He added that "I want to play basket-ball that way I can play with my friends who are African American. My friends don't know how to play soccer."

Language was another activity encouraged at the tutorial program. The data revealed that the tutorial program encouraged the children to speak French and/or their native languages in their interactions. The director of the program speaks French and always spoke French to the African children during my observation sessions. Whenever she heard the children interact in English, she engaged them in a conversation in French. During the interview she noted that "the children need to keep speaking French and Lingala. They do not understand but that is part of their identity and we should not allow them to lose it."

One of the parents also explained that the Director once hired a native speaker of Lingala, a language spoken in the Congo requesting that she stimulates the use of the language. Unfortunately, because of funding issues, that employment was canceled. However, the only time the children spoke French or Lingala was when the Director of the program was around

Another theme unveiled by the data is limited exposure of children to French and/or native languages. According to the director of the program, the children receive very little to no exposure to their native languages. The parents agree with the director and argue that it is difficult to keep the students speaking their native languages. One of them said "my children spend a lot of time at school and at after school and my husband and I work long hours. When we come home, we are very often tired. The only time we often converse with the children in Lingala is on weekends; but that is not enough. So, they are more exposed to English and speak less and less French and Lingala." Besides, the director of the program mentioned that some of the parents relied on their children to speak English. She said "in fact, some of the parents struggle to speak English and they are aware of the necessity to improve their fluency if they want to function in this country. They always speak English to their children and that helps them practice." Mr. O, a parent made a similar comment when he reported that "my children help me a lot with my English. You know, at my age, it's not easy to learn another language. Sometimes, I don't understand what people tell me and I ask my children to help me understand."

The last theme revealed in the data is children's reluctance to speak their native languages. During the observations, I noted that the children only spoke their native language or even French when the director of the program was around. As soon as she was away, they always preferred the use of the English language. The children reported using English in their interaction because it is spoken by everybody, at school and in the neighborhood. One of them discussed that he would love to speak his native language better to understand what his parents are saying about him. But he said, "it is too hard. It is easier when I speak English because everybody can understand me."

DISCUSSION

An analysis of the data reveals that the French speaking African immigrants are "in-between spaces" (Bhabha, 1994). They have a hybrid identity revealed through the languages they speak. Their knowledge of Lingala unveils their African identity while French as well as the origins of their names displays the influence of the colonial experience. In addition to their African and post-colonial identity is a post immigration identity that is in the process of being developed. The children's post immigration experience seems to create a relationship of power in which their African and post-colonial identity is marginalized in favor of a cultural and linguistic assimilation of their new American identity (Said, 1979).

The post immigration experience promotes the marginalization of the children's linguistic and cultural background as it seems to be the case for the participants of this study. Their background is often marginalized by the school system and has a devastating effect on the children's academic achievement (Portes, 1999). To accommodate themselves to the school organization, the children contribute to that marginalization by minimizing their interaction with their culture and language of origin as it is the case of the participants of this study.

The minimization of the children's interaction with their background is perceptible during the activities of the tutorial program. The tutorial program attempted to compensate the marginalization of their cultural capital at school. Succeeding in such a goal would have revalorized the children identity while grounding them with culturally and linguistically relevant activities (Goodwin, 2002). The revalorization of the children's identity was however difficult as they did not seem to perceive their cultural and linguistic backgrounds as assets.

The children were in the process of Americanization and were looking forward to being assimilated into the American cultures and languages (Zhou, 1997). Their only connection to their cultures and languages of origin was their parents due to their post immigration experiences (Somé-Guiébré, 2011). The marginalization of their cultural and social origins pressures the children "to suppress their problematic identity and to better assimilate into the American norms and cultures" (Somé-Guiébré, p. 277)

The Americanization was also perceptible in the children's reluctance to use French or Lingala to communicate with one another. It seemed obvious that the Director of the program was doing some efforts in keeping the children connected with their linguistic backgrounds. However, her efforts were not relegated at the level of parents who would rather use English to communicate with their children. Communicating with their children in English could be perceived as a survival strategy as it promotes the adaptation to post-immigration environment. Unfortunately, by doing so the parent contributes to the devaluation of the students' cultural heritage (Alidou, 2000) which can hinder academic fulfillment and positive identity formation.

Another aspect of the formation of students' identity is relevant to the difference of their linguistic background from that of schools. The children's writings show that they are in the process of learning to speak and write English and that can often be challenging. As Shabaya (2006) noted, adjustment to school culture and language was more challenging to them than their English-speaking counterparts. They had to adjust to their new environment and learn a new language, and that slowed down the process of their academic performance. However, that process could be speed up if schools valued their cultural heritage by considering their academic, linguistic, and social backgrounds (Alidou, 2000).

Conclusion

This article has explored the construction of immigrant children's identity through the activities of a tutorial program conceived to help them cope with their post-immigrations challenges. The findings unveil that although the children had a hybrid identity prior to immigration, that identity was made complex during their immigration experiences and the marginalization of their social, cultural, and linguistic background from school setting. The post immigration experiences and the marginalization of their background constituted a push factor for cultural and linguistic assimilation which was revealed throughout the article.

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