ENGENDERING SUBJECTIVITIES: NARRATIVES OF AFRICAN IMMIGRANT GIRLS IN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

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The goal of this study was to illuminate the educational experiences of one of the least researched immigrant groups – African girls. I relied mainly on narratives of four African immigrant girls in public high schools to elucidate how these girls defined their learning environment. Out of school observations were used to supplement in-depth phenomenological interviews. I drew from four theoretical concepts – academic achievement, social and cultural capital and boundary work to elucidate the strategies these four girls used in their attempt to achieve academic success. This study was also about identity. Banks & Banks (2010) assert that in order to understand the academic outcomes of minority students, we have to also know their identification processes. To this end, my goal was illuminate how this group of girls constructed their identity as they navigated high school, and how these processes shaped their academic outcomes.

The premise of this study is that African girls are not a monolithic group. While participants in the study share an "African" heritage, they have other distinguishing features which can lead to a range of schooling experiences. African girls can be differentiated by their immigration stories, countries of origins, family background, among other distinguishing factors. In this regard, I argue for the inclusion of diverse experiences in the discussion of girls' education, with the hope that this research will challenge mainstream perspectives that have for a

long time taken the experiences of White-middle class girls as the universal experiences of all girls.

While this study confirmed challenges faced by immigrant students in school, it also revealed a more nuanced pattern in how these girls viewed and experienced school. Participants acknowledged negative experiences but showed resilience in the face of these adversities. As such, agency became a major determining factor in how they constructed and negotiated their identity within the school context.

Finally, in this study, I offer an alternative narrative about immigrant students in public school, who often time are depicted as having negative educational experiences. Participants' narratives showed that while these girls faced challenges in school, they did not dwell in the negative aspects of their schooling. For the most part, these girls were positive about their school, their teachers and peers. Equally, they were optimistic about their future educational and occupational prospects. My hope is that this study will contribute to our understanding on how immigrant students experience school the way they do.

Acknowledgement

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PREFACE

This study explored identity construction of African immigrant girls at two public high schools. Similar to Olafson (2006) and Kelly (1997), I view schools as important spaces in the production of subjectivities. In this study, I attended to girls' voices to illuminate how a group of four girls from four different African nations constructed subjective identities as they negotiated the day-to-day realities in school. I relied on four theoretical frameworks to examine how this group of immigrant girls constructed meanings of their educational experiences at two public high schools. Indeed, as scholars studying girls have argued, globalization has brought new opportunities for girls that have prompted people to rethink how girlhood is defined (Jiwani, Steenbergen & Mitchell, 2006). They argue that the meaning of girlhood is constantly changing. In their anthology *Girlhood: Redefining the Limits,* Jiwani and colleagues (2006) assert that even in the same historical time frame, girlhood is always shifting because girls' experiences are affected by larger social structures such as race, gender and ethnicity. Weiler (2000) contends that in order to understand how girls from various racial, ethnic and class backgrounds experience school, we need to look past the "additive models that formulate" these structures (race, ethnicity and class) as "independent dimensions of experiences" (p. 22). Weiler further argues that instead, we need to take a holistic look at how various structures in the lives of girls intersect if we are to understand not only how girls experience school but also how these experiences shape their future aspirations.

This point is pertinent to scholars of girl culture, especially those who examine the lives of girls living on the margins of society. These girls include immigrant and refugee girls who face numerous challenges as a result of their multiple subordinate statuses resulting from their race, ethnicity, gender, immigration status, class, and language.

While the number of studies on girl culture has risen exponentially in the last two decades, researchers have not paid adequate attention to the diversity of girls' lives. Scholars studying girls' lives complain that girls and women have often been lost in the research agenda due to inadequate approaches used to examine their lives. Failure to acknowledge how girls' multiple identities (including gender, race, ethnicity, class, academic ability) intersect, "only serves to objectify, exclude and silence girls and young women in the society" (Hussein, Berman, Polleti, Lougheed-Smith, Ladha, Ward & Macquarie, 2006, p. 24). Like Erkut, Fields, Sing & Marx (2002), my view is that these social structures mediate gender in "ways that produce qualitatively different female experiences for girls and young women" (p. 497). Jiwani and colleagues (2006) similarly posit that in order to have a deeper understanding of the complexity of girls' lives, we must conceptualize their lives at the intersection of various social structures. This is what I attempted to do in this project. By exploring the lives of these four young women from Africa, my goal was to emphasize the notion of *multiple femininities*. I argue similar to Jiwani et al. (2006) that the experiences of being a girl, particularly in a setting such as school, are "intrinsically tied to the multiplicity of social processes that interact to shape their identities" (p. 20). In crafting this study, my goal was not to develop a comparison of the girls' experiences. Rather, like Hussein et al. (2006), I wanted to create a map that "simultaneously explores commonalities, differences and hierarchies between the girls" (p. 65). My hope is that this study will enhance educators' understanding not just of African but of all immigrant girls' daily school interactions and processes.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

Complicating conventional discourse on immigrant education

I began this project with preconceived notions about minority students in public schools. My bias mainly emanated from my reading of the United States' literature on minority students' educational experiences. Conventional discourse on immigrant education generally depicts immigrants as experiencing difficulties in school (Capps, Fix, Herwantoro, Murray, Ost & Passel 2005; Gibson, 1991; Lee, 1997; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2004). While there is much to be learned from these studies, much of the narrative has focused largely on challenges and negative schooling experiences (Lee, 2005; Lew, 2006; Saroub, 2005). These challenges have mainly been blamed on the cultural mismatch between home and school expectations.

To this end, Ngo (2010) contends that immigrant students' experiences and identity are oftentimes depicted within "dualistic categories" (p. 5). These accounts, he adds, portray children of immigrants as experiencing a type of clash of culture between their home culture and American culture. Ngo argues that in contrasting American and immigrant culture, research in the field depicts immigrant identity and culture as traditional while American culture is seen as modern. From this perspective, immigrant youth are conflicted about whether to adopt the modern ways or maintain their traditional or home culture. Ngo suggests that immigrant students' experiences are "messier" and more "contradictory" than the dualistic explanations that have long been offered by such research (p. 4). He refers to these explanations as "simplistic accounts" and argues that what is missing from them are the "background and contexts" explaining the "unfinished, precarious identities and contested social relations" (p. 6). By doing

this, Ngo is arguing against "hegemonic discourses" that he claims have so far failed to account for the contradictory aspects of immigrant students' identity (p. 6).

Like many of my predecessors in the field, I began this project expecting to hear the same narrative that Ngo was critiquing. Because of their social position as Africans, women and Blacks living in a White-dominated society, I thought that my participants' accounts of schooling would mainly entail the negative schooling experiences that I have so often read. In contrast, these girls' narratives of school and American life suggested otherwise. I am not claiming that these girls never faced challenges in school. Rather, their accounts did not dwell on or emphasize the negative experiences. Indeed, the girls confirmed many of the challenges faced by immigrant students in school. However, these four girls were for the most part happy about their schools and their teachers and they were even more optimistic about their futures regarding education and careers. My goal here is to introduce an alternative narrative to the dominant discourses about immigrants, and particularly immigrant girls' experiences in school, which have so often dwelt on these students' negative experiences. In doing this, I hope the study can contribute to the discussion on how we can better educate immigrant students.

Background of study

According to distinguished scholars of immigration Ruben Rumbaut and Alejandros Portes (2001), in the U.S. schools have historically been called upon to address societal changes stemming from the arrival of new cultural groups. Rumbaut and Portes (2001) further contend that the diversity of recent immigrants in the U.S. is unprecedented. The current wave of immigration began with the passage of the Immigration Act by the U.S. Congress in 1965 and includes immigrants from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East and Africa (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). This large-scale immigration has had implications in all

aspects of American society, including education. Nearly one in five students in k-12 schooling are children of immigrants (Capps et al, 2005). Statistics show that while the number of immigrant children has been increasing at a rapid rate at the k-12 level, the highest proportion is enrolled in the upper grades. This trend, adds Capps et al., (2005), suggests that high schools face the greatest challenges in educating immigrant children. As a result, numerous studies have been conducted in an attempt to understand challenges facing immigrant children in school (Conchas, 2006; Qin, 2001; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001).

Despite this interest, we still do not fully comprehend how some immigrant students experience school. This is because research on immigrant education has disproportionately focused on certain immigrant groups. Much of this research has paid attention to Latino and Asian students and focused less on Black immigrants. The few studies that have looked at Black immigrants have mainly attended to the educational experiences of West Indian groups such as Caribbeans, Trinidadians and Jamaicans. In contrast, the schooling experiences of recently arrived African immigrants and refugees remain under-researched. Warinner (2007) goes as far as calling African immigrants the "changing face of immigration" (p. 344) but wonders why scholars have not paid adequate attention to this group. Similarly, while research has shown the salience of identity in the lives of immigrants (Qin, 2003; Saroub, 2006; Waters, 1999), not much is known about how immigrant students construct, negotiate and maintain their identity as they try to adapt in their new environments. In this respect, Banks (2009) contends that understanding how minority students identify and socialize will help us predict and explain these students' academic outcomes.

In the same light, while equal educational opportunity has been the enduring rhetoric of public education, children from minority groups, including those of immigrant status, continue to

face many structural and institutional barriers that hinder their success in school. The fate of immigrant children is further complicated by the fact that they also have to deal with cultural barriers such as language, food, new rules and regulations, and unfamiliar climate changes as they try to fit into their new surroundings. For Black immigrants such as those from Sub-Sahara Africa, the disadvantages are further compounded by their race, which relegates them to the lowest rung of the racial hierarchy in this society. For Black immigrant girls and women the situation is certainly more critical. At the macro-level, women in general continue to reap fewer rewards for their educational credentials compared to men with comparable qualifications. According to Arnot (2000), gender inequality in industrialized societies such as the U.S. is a result of the strong sexual division of labor and how men and women relate to those divisions. Schools, she contends, play a significant role in the perpetuation and reinforcement of this inequality.

Similarly, while the achievement gap between boys and girls has diminished in the recent past, adolescent girls face other concerns that might continue to hamper their success in school. Lack of self-esteem stemming from negative body images has been found to be one such inhibitor. In her book *Schoolgirls: Young women, self esteem and the confidence gap*, Peggy Orenstein (1994) suggests that self-esteem is a fundamental factor that shapes teenage girls' academic outcomes. Furthermore, compared to boys of the same age, adolescent girls across all races tend to be "more anxious, and stressed, suffer from depression, experience body dissatisfaction, suffer from a greater number of eating disorders and attempt suicide more frequently" (American Psychological Association Task Force on Adolescent Girls, 1996, p. 14). All these factors have dire implications for girls' educational outcomes. Moreover, my contention is that for Black immigrant women and girls these challenges are heightened due to

the multiple levels of disadvantages they face as a result of their gender, ethnicity/race and immigrant status. Thus, my theoretical stance rests on the fact that the success of African immigrant girls in school will be determined by the ways in which they view themselves and the choices they make during the adjustment process.

Significance and purpose of the study

The debate on how to best educate immigrant students is not new. Since the inception of public schooling, educational researchers have attempted to develop *best practices* for teaching the new arrivals. Even though the largest numbers of the recent immigrants to the U.S. have been Asians and Latinos, the number of Black immigrants continues to rise rapidly. The Black immigrant population, including those from Africa, has increased by over 2000% since 1960 (Rong & Brown, 2002). It had been projected that by the year 2010, this group will make up 12% of the Black population in the U.S. (Edmonston & Passel, 1992). In the same regard, Terrazas (2009) reports that one third of all refugees and political asylum seekers admitted to the U.S. in 2007 were from Africa. Yet, we still do not know how this group of students experience school. This is because most of the studies in the field have focused on Asian, Latino and West Indian immigrant communities.

Similarly, even though research has established a relationship between positive identity construction and the academic outcomes of students from minority groups (Conchas, 2002; Cross, 1971, 1978, 1991; Phinney, 1990), few of these studies have explored how marginalized students, such as African immigrants and refugee students, construct their identities, and how these processes shape their schooling experiences. This study is an attempt to fill that gap.

This study was an investigation of how African immigrant girls' identities shape the ways in which they view schooling. The main purpose of this study was to examine how identity

structures the educational outcomes of four African immigrant girls. I argue similar to Cokley and Chapman (2008), who claim that the basis for understanding the educational experiences of minority students rests on understanding these students' cultural and academic identities and how these are developed in relation to the school environment. As U.S. society becomes increasingly diverse, the need to understand how girls from different social and cultural contexts experience school becomes even more crucial.

In the study, I sought to understand ways in which the young women from Africa negotiated multiple identities as they navigated the school context and ultimately how this shaped their views of school. By examining the impact of ethnic group membership on one's identity, studies such as Phinney (1989), Zinn (1980), Baldwin (1979), and Gordon (1976) have also found ethnic self-identity to be an essential component in the identity development of students from minority groups. This becomes even more important, because as Erickson (1966) asserts, "Members of the disenfranchised and marginalized groups tend to internalize the negative stereotypes and consequently develop a negative identity and self hate" (p. 154).

In this study, I further explored the ways in which these four girls' identities functioned interactively to impact their experiences in school. Rather than focus solely on individual experiences, my study also emphasized the role the environment played in the identity formation process. In this regard, I relied on Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner and Cain's (1998) conceptualization of identity as being "improvised – in the flow of activity within a specific social situation and from cultural resources at hand" (p. 15). I view identity construction as a dynamic and fluid process that is determined by the specific contexts individuals find themselves in. Similar to Waters (1999), I argue that the identities of African immigrants are reflections of their unique histories and experiences. At the same time, while the new environment that the

immigrant girls find themselves is important in determining success in school, agency stood out as an important mediating factor in the educational choices that these girls made.

Given that most African communities are patriarchal in nature, thus offering even fewer opportunities for women and girls in their home countries (Rumbaut & Feliciano, 2005), I drew on the approach that examining the "gendered pathways" in education will help us understand the challenges that these immigrants face as they struggle to "balance the family traditions as well as the values and norms of the host society" (Abada & Tenkorang, 2009, p. 64). My goal was to illuminate the ways in which structure, culture and agency interact in shaping the educational experiences of these four girls. As such, I argued against essentialized notions of gender that fail to take into account the experiences of women and girls from various ethnic and racial groups.

The decision to focus on adolescent girls hinged on the fact that at this stage, identity construction has been found to be a major developmental process, particularly for girls, and therefore has implications for their adjustment process, both at home and in school. The American Association of University Women's 1992 groundbreaking study found this stage to be a very tumultuous period for adolescent girls. The study concluded that in adolescence, girls are more likely to have problems associated with body image and consequently are more prone to develop eating disorders and depression. Erickson's model of human development states that the fifth stage, which he distinguished as *identity vs. identity confusion*, is a period when adolescents strive to discover who they are as individuals. The model summarizes this stage as a time when adolescents "are exploring who they are, what they are about and where they are going in life" (p. 142). It is also a time when "individuals are continuously structuring and shaping their sense of selves and evaluating their educational and occupational possibilities" (Chavous, Bernat,

Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Khon-Wood & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 1). For immigrant girls, this is particularly significant because in addition to the universal issues adolescent girls deal with, they have to do this while also negotiating their sense of self within their new surroundings. This is a lot of pressure for teenage girls to go through.

Theoretical framework

In crafting this dissertation, I drew from three theoretical perspectives to delineate the strategies African immigrant girls use to construct their identity in the schooling context. The three frameworks I draw on include academic achievement, social and cultural capital, and boundary work. Because the goal of this study was to illuminate how the identities of minority students influence their schooling experiences, I begin by conceptualizing academic achievement. I explore the different ways in which achievement is defined in educational discourse. Next, I introduce Bourdieu's notions of cultural and social capital to explain educational trajectories of minority students. I also draw on Salazar's notion of social network framework to further explicate how minority students seek and develop relationships in school and the implications this has on their academic outcomes. Finally, I use the concept of boundary work to explain how and why individuals make distinctions while identifying themselves. Specifically, I focus on the notion of "symbolic boundaries," which Lamont (1992) defines as "the conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices and time and space" (p. 51). The above-mentioned concepts are relevant to this work, as they help illuminate strategies participants in the study employed to construct identities that helped them navigate the school system. Below is a graphical summary of my argument.

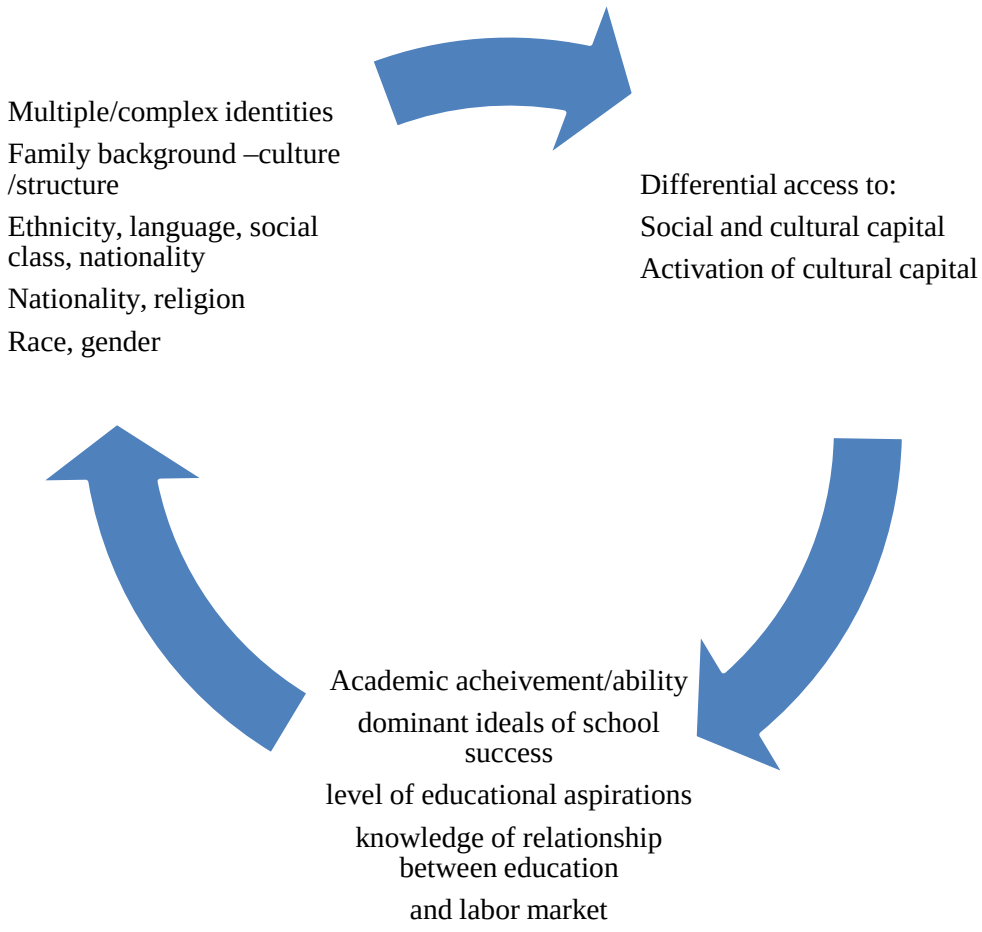

Figure 1: Summary of theoretical argument (For the interpretation of the reference to color and this and all the other figures, the reader is referred to the electronic version of this dissertation)

Explaining achievement differentials

In this dissertation, I explored how the four girls defined themselves as academic beings. In this regard, I focused on the notion of academic achievement. Academic achievement can be conceptualized in a variety of ways. However, the conventional way of defining achievement in most educational settings includes set standards such as attainment of a particular grade point average (GPA), grade level promotion, level of student engagement and graduation, among other criteria. While standards have become the driving force behind the call for accountability for teachers and students, the most commonly used "objective" measure for student performance is

the GPA. Subjective indicators used to measure performance include personality traits and non-cognitive skills such as student relationship with peers, teachers and school, motivation to learn, and self-esteem (Cunningham, Wang & Bishop-Swinburne, 2000). Through the Federal Law No Child Left Behind (NCLB), teachers, students and schools are being held accountable to specific standards including those mentioned above. Not all students, however, are performing at or above expected standards. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP) reports that students from poor backgrounds, many of whom are children of color, consistently achieve below the national average on these measures. The gap between White middle-class and minority children widens as these children continue through their school years.

Because a disproportionately high number of minority students continue to do poorly in standardized tests, many have questioned their fairness. Critics, including Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, and Sonia Nieto among others, view these measures as culturally biased against some groups, including poor and minority students. They argue that by relying on such objective measures, schools represent an Anglo-centric and middle-class viewpoint while devaluing the cultural experiences of poor and minority students. Critics of these measures further argue that the focus on such indicators masks other important attributes that are not necessarily academic but can still facilitate success in school. They have argued that non-cognitive skills and more subjective indicators should be included when gauging students' success. In opposing the standards movement, Sonia Nieto considers it dysfunctional and argues that defining school success in this way encourages students to abandon part of their identity. According to Nieto (1998), students' ability to use "skills, talents and other experiences learned at home and in the community to further their learning" must also be included in the definition of school success (p. 56).

Different theories have been used to explain why some children achieve while others fail in school. In the attempt to explain why some children, especially minority students, have not been achieving as well as their White middle-class counterparts, some scholars have pointed to these children's backgrounds, including their culture and family, as the main cause of underachievement. Commonly held assumptions about innate academic capabilities describe minority students such as Blacks and Latinos as having low IQ's compared to their White and Asian counterparts. These *deficit theories* have emphasized the role of culture and genetics in minority children's underachievement (Nieto, 1998). These deficit theories assert that minority children's failures in school emanate from "poorly developed language (specifically not speaking Standard English)," inadequate parenting, "too little stimulation," and chaotic and disorganized home lives (Nieto, 1998, p. 255). On the other hand, children from middle-class homes speak standard English (which is the dialect of instruction) and engage in "school-like pre-reading activities, go to the library more often, attend museums and other cultural events" among other middle class activities that are deemed necessary for school success (p. 257). In this respect, these theories point to the cultural incompatibility through which students' home culture clashes with the school culture, in effect producing school failure.

Rather than placing blame on minority children's inferior genes and culture as deficit theorists do, some scholars explain underperformance by pointing to the children. These scholars argue that it is the students' lack of effort that causes academic failure. In their study of first graders in the Baltimore school system, Alexander and colleagues (1997) looked at the number of student absences and tardiness to determine the level of effort and how this might be related to achievement. In using these indicators as evidence of lack of effort, they found that these behaviors were directly correlated to school dropout. Like persistence, dependability and

other under-studied traits, they also found that lack of effort plays just as important a role in work and school success as do the more easily measurable indicators, such as standardized tests.

School structure has also been named as a source of academic failure for some students. Reproduction theorists claim that is it is the reproductive nature of the education system that has led to the underachievement of some children. Reproduction theorists further claim that school serves the interests of the dominant classes, thereby making it easier for them to flourish in school. The role of school, they claim, is to keep the poor in their place by teaching them how to fill subordinate positions in society. Through the hidden curriculum, students from poor backgrounds are prepared for more subordinate positions and to be good workers and respect authority, while children of the dominant classes are prepared to be future managers and leaders (Anyon, 1992; Bowles & Gintis; 1976; Macleod, 1996). Schools, they conclude, not only reproduce the status quo but also help maintain social inequality.

Theories of achievement were important when explicating how these four girls defined their own academic achievement. Focusing on achievement was also helpful in analyzing how these girls conceptualized school success and their general understanding of academic achievement. In the next section, I explain the role cultural and social capital play in shaping educational outcomes.

Social and cultural capital

Social and cultural capital were both useful terms in my analysis of the four girls' schooling experiences. Participants in the study were characterized by a range of academic abilities, from a high achiever to one who was, at one time, at risk of dropping out of school. In the study I attempted to explain these differences using the social and cultural capital framework. I argue that even though these four girls shared an African heritage, they came from different

family backgrounds and social contexts which influenced the ways in which they experienced school, ultimately leading to differential academic outcomes. The term cultural capital was coined by Pierre Bourdieu to explain disparities in educational attainment. From this perspective, the concepts social capital and cultural capital were useful in explaining both the resources these four girls drew on to navigate the school system and how this influenced their academic outcomes. According to Bourdieu (1979), economic disparities are not sufficient to explain the educational disparities of students from different social economic statuses.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) have argued that in addition to economic factors, cultural habits and dispositions inherited from the family are fundamental for school success. In explicating educational inequality, Bourdieu argues that students with more valuable social and cultural capital fare better in school than their counterparts who lack such capital. I found this argument relevant in explaining the disparities in the academic achievement of the four girls in my study. In this respect, Bourdieu defines *cultural capital* as the general background, knowledge and skills that are passed from one generation to the next. From a boundary work perspective, Lamont and Lareau (1988) define cultural capital as the "institutional repertoires of high status signals useful for the purposes of marking and drawing symbolic boundaries in a given context" (p. 164). To this effect, Lizardo (2010) explains that cultural capital includes those "resources that are actively mobilized by members of groups or class fractions to establish their difference and to devalue the cultural resources and symbolic practices of outsiders" (p. 310).

Social capital is another term developed by Bourdieu that is viewed as having implications for educational attainment and social mobility. Other prominent scholars, including James Coleman, have contributed to the development of this theory. Just like with cultural

capital, Bourdieu was interested in understanding how the middle and the upper middle classes were able to capitalize on material and human resources. *Social capital* in this respect refers to the "resources that inhere in the structure of relations" between individuals and organizations (Costa, 2010, p. 1). The resources are available through a network of relationships. In his study on the educational attainment among children attending private and public schools, Coleman (1998) concluded that children attending private schools fared much better in school because of the strong sense of community and norms that parents, students and teachers embraced. Coleman further posited that *social capital* is concerned with how social relationships help children develop their cognitive as well their social abilities. From this, Coleman concluded that social capital can be beneficial for social mobility of members of low-income and other marginalized communities. Defining social and cultural capital from the above perspectives allows for an analysis of what schools can do to help marginalized students gain access to social and cultural capital and consequently attain success in school (Lubeinski, 2004).

Ricardo-Salazar's theory of *social network framework* is also useful in explaining which relationships these girls developed in school and the effects these had on their attempt to succeed in school. From the schooling perspective, Salazar (1997, 2001, 2004 & 2010) defines social capital as "consisting of resources and key forms of social support embedded in one's network or associations and accessible through direct or indirect ties with institutional agents[1]," (p. 117). According to Stanton-Salazar (2004), institutional agents such as teachers and counselors can "manipulate the social and institutional conditions in and out of school" and as a result determine which students make it and which do not (p. 117). Such individuals, adds Stanton-Salazar, serve

[1] Salazar defines *institutional agents* as individuals of relatively high status who can help "transmit or negotiate the transmission of highly valued resources for youth." These individuals possess highly valued human, social and cultural support (Stanton-Salazar, 2004, p. 117)

as gatekeepers and provide access to opportunities that would otherwise be inaccessible to marginalized students. Nieto (1998) similarly contends that such relationships are linked with caring because it is only through trusting and close relationships with teachers that some students will gain access to important schooling resources. While the above theoretical explanations were particularly important in understanding the academic achievements of these four girls, the theoretical explanation that follows was especially pertinent in addressing how these girls constructed their identity based on their day-to-day lived experiences.

Boundary work and identity

The concept of *boundary work* was equally helpful in the analysis of this project. This framework was particularly relevant in explaining not only how these four girls made sense of their experiences but also how they viewed and positioned themselves in school. People use different strategies to "symbolically concentrate themselves and separate themselves from others" (Lamont & Fournier, 1992, p. 1). Accordingly, Lamont (1992) defines boundary work as the ways in which people position or situate themselves in relation to "others." Because *boundary work* is a "central process in the constitution of the *self"* (p. 45), I found it especially useful in explicating how these girls defined themselves. Boundary work in this perspective involves the "structures of thought" that members of a group use to exclude others (Lamont, 1992), leading to "us" and "them" distinctions. According to DiMaggio (1992), boundary making emanates from differences in tastes that are grounded in forms of cultural practices. Similarly, Lamont & Molnar (1998) contend that "accounts of cultural boundaries are structurally rooted in differences among persons such as race, ethnicity, class, and gender when such properties are based on tastes, aesthetic dispositions or as emergent properties of interactions" (p. 21). Brewer (1986) reiterates that "pressures to evaluate ones' own group

positively through in-group/out-group comparison lead social groups to attempt to differentiate themselves from each other" (p. 56).

In this study, I specifically drew on the notion of *symbolic boundaries*. From a cultural sociology perspective, *symbolic boundaries* are the conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and time and space. Epstein (1992) defines *symbolic boundaries* as the lines that include and define some people, groups and things while excluding others (p. 232). While symbolic boundaries generate feelings of similarity and group membership, they are also used to separate people into groups, thereby creating social inequality (Lamont, 1992, 2002). Like Lamont, in this project I analyzed the meaning-making process by which the four girls made boundaries between themselves and "others." Meanings given to boundaries vary across class, race, nations and so forth, depending on the cultural and structural contexts that shape these groups' lives. To this end, Toren (2001) asserts that dualistic categories such as White/Black, male/female, native/newcomer are "basic to the creation and maintenance of social categories that sustain inequality by establishing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion" (p. 177). Furthermore, adds Toren (2001), sociologists are especially interested in analyzing this process by looking at the self-definitions of ordinary people, while paying particular attention to the salience of various racial and class groups through boundary work. Meanwhile, Lamont and Fournier (2000) argue for understanding how boundaries are made and the social consequences these have. In this respect, boundary work was useful in explaining how the participants in this study positioned themselves based on their race, ethnicity and nationality, and the meanings they appropriated to these identities. In Chapter Five I use the concept of boundary work to analyze how these girls defined themselves using three salient identities, namely race, ethnicity and nationality. Lamont (2006) explains that boundaries are first maintained by conceptual means.

Individuals, argues Lamont, must be able to differentiate themselves from others by "drawing on criteria of community and a sense of shared belonging within their subgroup" (p. 172). This particular argument was helpful in explicating the criteria participants used to draw boundaries between themselves and their peers. For instance, participants emphasized distinctions between them and their African-American peers and used criteria such as academic ability and temperament in drawing these distinctions.

Another important theme that emerged from this analysis is the notion of categories. Wimmer (2008) asserts that boundaries can be defined by the use of categories, as social and behavioral dimensions, where social groups are divided into "us" and "them." This does not mean, however, that the world is necessarily composed of sharply bounded groups. According to Vasquez (2010), boundaries, especially ethnic boundaries which are an important focus of this study, may be "fuzzy, with unclear demarcations and few social consequences thus allowing individuals to maintain membership in several categories or switch identities situationally" (p. 116). Participants in my study constructed their identities based on the situations or the contexts they found themselves in. For instance, Angela, the highest achiever of the four girls, strongly believed that being African helped her succeed academically. Still, she claimed she could give up her African identity to become American so as to gain access to the numerous educational resources available to American students. Okamura (1981) refers to this as *situational identities*, through which individuals may display certain identity features in different contexts.

Conclusion: Overview of the remainder of the study

The remainder of this dissertation is organized into six chapters. Because this study is about African immigrant girls, what follows in Chapter Two is a review of selected literature in girls' cultural studies. In this section, I provide a background of how the field has evolved. As I

argued earlier, forces including globalization and migration have affected the ways in which girlhood is defined. I could not therefore write this dissertation without acknowledging some of these changes. In this dissertation, I make the argument that girls are not a homogeneous group as often assumed; rather, girls' experiences and identities are situational and contextual. In this chapter, I include literature delineating how girls from different cultural milieus experience school. In Chapter Three, I provide a glimpse into the lives of these girls by writing a portrait of each of the four girls. In providing this background, I focus mainly on their lives as related to attending and participating in school. Specifically, I describe their families and how and why they relocated to the United States.

In Chapters Four, Five and Six, I interpret the data for the study, specifically the ways in which these girls navigated school and how they constructed their identities. In Chapter Four, I address how these girls viewed themselves as academic beings and how they constructed their academic identities. Even though these girls shared an African identity, their accounts of school success and how to attain school success were very different from each other. Sometimes they followed and even embraced the conventional views of achievement, but other times they rejected and appropriated their own meanings of achievement. Chapter Five addresses how participants navigated the terrain of girlhood. In doing this, I address multiple aspects of their lives, including how they positioned themselves relative to other girls in their schools, how they viewed themselves as girls and how or if these views were informed by their schooling experiences. I focus on body image issues, views of friendship, notions of belonging, and peer group formation amongst these girls. Research on girl culture has shown that girls experience school differently as a result of the social locations that they inhabit. Therefore, it was necessary

that I pay attention to their lives uniquely as girls, as immigrants, and as Black girls and how these social identities influenced the ways in which they experienced school.

Chapter Six, the final data chapter, is concerned with boundary work. Participants' identity construction was shaped not only by how they viewed themselves but also how others viewed them. I focus specifically on the three salient identities that served as distinguishing markers. Race, ethnicity and national identities stood as important markers when the girls defined themselves relative to other girls. Their accounts suggested that it was especially important that people distinguish between them and their African American peers. Finally, I elucidate how these three salient markers influenced their future plans including education, career, and the decision to move back to their native countries or not. In Chapter Seven, I discuss the implications and conclusions of the study.

CHAPTER TWO

EXAMINING THE CONCEPTUAL AND THE METHODOLOGICAL

Starting from selected literature

Even though the field of girl cultural studies is relatively new, numerous studies have been conducted to explain how and why girls follow the life trajectories that they do. These studies, including Lee (2001), Weiler (2000), AAUW (1999), Orenstein (1994), among others, have focused on different aspects of girls' lived experiences. Yet very few of these studies have focused on the experiences of girls of color. Most of the existing research in the field has focused on the lives and experiences of White middle-class girls, which for a long time were treated as the "universal" experiences of all girls. Meanwhile, not much is known about girls living on the margins of society. These include racial minority, immigrant and refugee girls. While investigating young women's experiences in school, very few researchers have also looked at the complex and the multidimensional aspects of girls' identity. Harris (2003) adds that these accounts have failed to acknowledge the material context of the girls' realities. Furthermore, these accounts are given without placing the girls' actions and decisions in contexts or addressing them as negotiated strategies (p. 61). Equally missing is research looking at how the various dimensions of girls' lives intersect.

In this study, I wanted to highlight African girls' agency. Girls, assert Jiwani et al. (2006), are often defined as a homogeneous group "with no agency and often without acknowledgement of the complex power relations that weave through their diverse experiences" (p. 1). As such, hearing the voices of the girls I studied was critical to me. My goal was to highlight these girls' agency using their own words. In doing this, I was able to illuminate how different facets of these girls' lives intersected.

In light of this, the goal of this chapter is two-fold. The first section delineates studies on girl culture. I specifically focus on research of girls' educational issues. I also outline relevant studies on immigrant girls' educational experiences. Then, I describe my research process, specifically my methods for collecting and analyzing data. It is here also that I account for my positionality as a researcher and how this might have shaped the study's trajectory.

Educational attainment of mainstream girls

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, literature on girl culture depicted adolescent girls as victims of "girl poisoning culture[2]," struggling to maintain a sense of themselves in the face of insurmountable adversities (Orenstein, 1994; Pipher, 1994). Carol Gilligan's (1982) *In a different voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Peggy Orenstein's *School Girls: Young Women, Self esteem and the Confidence Gap* and Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* are some of the important work that helped shape the field of girls' cultural studies in the U.S. These studies described adolescence for girls as a period of turmoil and confusion, a period where girls lose themselves in the ocean of mass and popular culture (Pipher, 1994). The studies concluded that in pre-adolescence, girls think highly of themselves, but as they enter adolescence, their confidence wanes and so does their academic achievement. Unlike Gilligan's and Pipher's work, which emphasized the psychological and developmental dimensions of White middle-class girls, other studies in the field specifically focused on girls' educational outcomes. For instance, in their landmark study *How Schools Shortchange Girls,* the American Association University Women (1994) outlined a series of inequities that girls face in classrooms. Specifically, the study revealed that girls receive less teacher attention than boys, less complex and challenging interaction with their teachers than

[2] According to Pipher (1994), girls come of age in a "girls-poisoning culture". As a result these girls fall prey to depression, eating disorders, suicide attempts and low self-esteem.

boys, less constructive feedback from the teachers than boys and less wait time than boys' responses, and that gender bias in teacher-student interaction varied across subject area, with Math and Sciences showing the largest inequity (American Institutes for Research, 1992).

Similarly, Sadker and Sadker's *Failing at Fairness* (1994) and Peggy Orenstein's (1992) *School girls* revealed numerous inequities that female students were subjected to and challenges they faced in the school. These studies described the gendered nature of teaching and learning. Drawing on research they collected over a span of two decades, Myra and David Sadker reiterated AAUW's concerns. Through thousands of hours of observations, interviews and document analysis, they concluded that girls lag behind in school because of gender bias. In echoing AAUW's prior findings, they described a similar unequal pattern of educational opportunities that favor boys. Among other findings, Sadker and Sadker (1995) pointed out that while girls begin school with higher academic capabilities than boys, girls end up scoring 60 points less than boys in SAT scores, suggesting that girls learn to dumb themselves down in order to become more popular and have positive experiences in school. These studies, however, in particular failed to acknowledge the diversity in the educational experiences of girls in public schools. Particularly, they failed to take into account how these experiences might be shaped by the girls' race, age, ethnicity or their geographical location. Since then, some studies have attempted to address these concerns.

Pichler (2009) is one such study. In her study, Pichler attempted to delineate both micro and macro processes that affect identity construction of young women from three different socio-cultural backgrounds. While specifically focusing on their discursive identities, Pichler investigated how a group of young women from three diverse backgrounds experience school, including a prestigious private school, a working class multi-ethnic community, and a group of

Bangladeshi girls attending a state school in the East End of London. These girls, Pichler discovered, drew on a range of different discourses and positioned themselves differently within their interactions. She identified several "local identities," including "cool and real" girls. These were the private school girls who she viewed as socially aware and knowledgeable (p. 4). Still, "tough and bad" girls' images emerged from a number of the girls, particularly during sex talk (p. 109). Ironically, the same girls presented themselves as "good" girls. Finally, some of the girls defined themselves as "sheltered and loved" girls (p. 65). The same girls sometimes positioned themselves as rebellious teenagers.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s another wave of literature on girls surfaced as a counter discourse to the earlier ones that depicted girls as "passive" and "victims of mass culture." This new wave of research characterized girls as "sassy", "independent" and "assertive" (Inness, 1999, 2005). Focusing on *girl power*, this literature described girls as challenging the traditional notions of femininity and using resource to construct new identities (Adams, 1998, p. 253). This period especially marked a shift in discourses in femininity, away from docility, quietness, and passivity. In describing research on girl power, Erevelles and Mutua (2005) explain that contemporary girlhood presents a complex interplay of "independence, assertiveness and strength with feminine attractiveness" (p. 254).

Since the above studies were conducted, both the U.S and Britain have come a long way in ensuring equal educational opportunities for girls. Girls have caught up to and, in some aspects, surpassed boys in educational attainment. The Department of Education 2005 statistics indicate that regardless of race or social class, women have higher GPAs and are graduating from college at a higher rate than men. A 2003 study conducted by the National Science Foundation illustrated the same point, concluding that girls perform as well as boys in standardized tests

even though they do not enroll in high-levels science classes. Dee (2007) painted a similar picture. This study demonstrated that while the gender gap in Math and Science has narrowed remarkably and the number of girls enrolling and graduating from college has surpassed that of boys, girls are still less likely than their male peers to enroll for advanced Science and Math while in high school.

Schooling experiences of immigrant girls

Similar to national trends, research on girls has also shown that immigrant girls exhibit better academic performance than their male counterparts (Bandon, 1991; Faliciano & Rumbaut, 2005; Gibson, 1998; Lee, 2001; Qin, 2004; Waters, 1996). These studies have revealed gender differences in favor of girls in K-12 schooling, particularly in academic engagement and performance, high school completion and future aspirations. Despite the general academic success of immigrant girls, these studies have revealed gender disparities among several ethnic groups. In order to understand how and why these differences occur, scholars have looked at the ways in which both girls and boys experience school and how these experiences impact academic proficiency.

Saroub (2005) wrote one such study. Her two-year ethnographic study, which focused on Yemeni American girls in Dearborn, Michigan, revealed that despite the numerous culturally based obstacles, many of these girls held a positive attitude towards school. The main purpose of the study was to uncover how Yemeni girls negotiated the different aspects of their lives and the implications this had on their schooling. Saroub explained that factors such as religion, gender, ethnicity and language intersected in complex ways in the lives of the Yemeni students in her research. Gender proved to be a salient factor in shaping the girls' educational experiences and adjustment processes in the U.S. According to Saroub, Yemeni girls often have to straddle two

worlds (home and school) that do not always complement each other. This tension, she claims, is due to the differences in expectations in these two spaces (home and school). The study concluded that despite these impediments, Yemeni girls were successful students. She argued that the traditional divisions along gender lines in this case favored the girls' success.

Saroub attributed these girls' academic success to several factors. First, Saroub claims that unlike the boys, Yemeni girls do not usually work outside school and neither do they participate in after- school programs. This gives them ample opportunities to pay more attention to their schoolwork. In addition, girls also put considerably more effort in school than Yemeni boys in order to avoid their parents pressuring them to get married. Parents in the study preferred to marry off their daughters if they were performing poorly in school. The strength of this study lies in its emphasis on the intersectionality of the different aspects of the Yemeni girls' lives. Unlike other studies in the field, which focus on single aspects of students' lives, Saroub argued that while gender was a salient feature in shaping these girls educational experiences, factors such as religion, family background and ethnicity intersected and informed the ways in which these girls perceived and consequently experienced school.

In one of the few studies focusing on the experiences of African immigrant girls in the U.S., Ekema-Agbaw (2000) narrates the experiences of her 11-year-old daughter Joy in a predominantly White school in rural Pennsylvania. Ekema-Agbaw, an African immigrant from Ghana, provides a glimpse of what it means to be a Black foreign-born African attending a predominantly White school, in the U.S. The chapter was based on written accounts, informal interviews and conversations that Agbaw had with her daughter. In the study, she chronicles her daughter's life in the margin, as a Black African immigrant girl attending a predominantly White school. Agbaw, a professor of English Education at a university in the United States, narrated

that she always felt like an outsider even within her professional circles. In this regard, she wonders how much pressure her daughter, who is merely 11, must be experiencing. In her book chapter she reveals that Joy exerts an insurmountable amount of effort to belong among her mostly White peers. She argues that, for the most part, Joy goes through the same issues U.S. teenage girls experience growing up, but has to do this within a "dominant White patriarchal culture" (p. 38). Confusion regarding puberty, concerns over dating, body image, hair and make-up are an indication that her daughter faces the same pressures as her White mainstream counterparts. This is evidence of Joy's struggles against the socio-cultural pressures that preadolescent and adolescent girls go through, she argues. According to Agbaw, making friends was difficult for her young daughter, as she was shunned by her White peers. In addition, Joy had also to deal with body issues. As a Black girl, Joy was concerned about her "nappy" hair, which she saw as different her from her White peers. Agbaw adds that her daughter's experiences seem to reflect not only societal and popular media depiction of immigrants from Africa, but also the gender relations in many African communities. But while many adolescent girls succumb to what Pipher (1994) terms as the "social developmental Bermuda triangle", Agbaw views Joy as a survivor, a "strong" black African girl who overcame her tribulation in the face of serious adversity" (p. 78). While we cannot generalize Joy's experiences to all African immigrant girls in the U.S., the narrative provides insights for better understanding how some African immigrant girls might experience school.

Family socialization and school

As indicated in Feliciano (2009), Lopez (2003), Qin-Hillard, (2003) and Zhou & Bankston (2001), family socialization is another strongly gendered aspect of immigrants' lives. These studies have established that immigrant parents have different expectations for their

daughters than for their sons. Accordingly, I hypothesize that the differences in expectations stemming from cultural norms would result in gender discrepancies in educational experiences which would eventually lead to differences in educational outcomes.

Smith-Hefner's (1993) study of Khmer refugees in metropolitan Boston echoes the above assertion. The ethnographic study was an investigation of the high dropout rates of female students among Khmer refugees. While not refuting the "macrosociological" and "ecological" explanation of the underperformance of Khmer refugees relative to other South-East Asian groups, Smith-Hefner also implicated gender as a significant factor in explaining the poor academic achievement and the high dropout rates among female Khmer students. Interviews with parents revealed that while they understood the importance of education for all their children, cultural and traditional ideals regarding gender norms continued to inform parents' attitudes towards education. Additionally, Smith-Hefner pointed out what she regarded as double standards in the moral expectations for men and women within the community. For example, in cases of sexual misconduct, Khmer women were held to a higher moral standard than their male colleagues. As a result, claims Smith-Hefner, the "weight of maintaining proper gender relations fell mostly and heavily on the shoulders of the Khmer women" (p. 140). In addition, the same role expectations significantly influenced the length of schooling for these women. This study affirmed the role of culture in the lives of Khmer immigrants. The study demonstrated how cultural norms practiced in their home countries, particularly those relating to gender norms, continue to shape immigrant families' lives in the U.S. Additionally, the study also demonstrated the different ways in which women and girls respond to these norms.

Lee (2002) observed a similar trend. In her ethnographic study of Hmong American students at a Wisconsin public school, Lee found that Hmong students were well aware of their

identities and how these shaped their lives. Lee claimed that the students often referred to categories such as race, ethnicity, gender and marital status to situate others. Similar to Smith-Hefner's findings, Lee reiterated that while still successful as students, the Hmong gender role norms expected girls to take on more of the household chores. In addition to schooling, Hmong girls were expected to cook, clean, and take care of the younger children in the home. Regarding the phenomenon of early marriage among the Hmong, Lee's findings paralleled Smith-Heffner's. The study revealed that while there are parents who urge their daughters to finish high school before they get married, similarly there are those who push their daughters to get married while still in high school. Unlike other studies which have minimized the negative impacts of early marriages of girls in school, Lee claims that even though these parents value education by encouraging their daughters to remain in school, their education is inevitably compromised once they get married.

In summary, several studies have delineated how immigrant girls from various ethnic groups experience school and how these experiences shape their academic outcomes. These studies offered important insights into understanding the educational experiences of immigrant girls. Differentiated parental expectations for girls, early marriages, parental human capital where educated mothers prioritized education for their daughters, cultural and religious factors were all found to have a profound impact in shaping immigrant girls' experiences at school and ultimately their educational outcomes. By focusing on the background of the students, the studies demonstrate the role of social context in explicating academic performance of children from diverse backgrounds. These studies provide insights for educators in their attempt to understand the relationship between students' cultural backgrounds and the gendered patterns in the educational attainment of children from immigrant groups.

However, these studies do not adequately address how gender interacts with other important socially constructed aspects of immigrant girls' lives, including ethnicity, race or social class. Moreover, none of these studies adequately address identity formation among immigrant girls. Furthermore, almost none of these studies included the schooling experiences of either immigrant boys or girls from Sub-Sahara Africa. This further suggests the need for research in these areas.

In this study, I examined the lives of African immigrant girls attending public high schools. I was not only interested in hearing their views of school but also what shaped these views. Ultimately, my goal was to understand how these experiences shaped their academic outcomes. In light of this, my study was guided by the following interrelated questions:

1. How do African immigrant girls in public high schools define their learning environment?
2. How are these views shaped by their experiences in school?
3. How do these views shape their academic outcomes?

Similarly, I focused on the girls' subjective positioning in their day-to-day lives at school. To this end, I explored the following questions:

1. How do these girls construct and negotiate their identities in the schooling context?
2. How are these strategies influenced by their day-to-day realities in school?
3. How do their identities shape their educational outcomes?

Methodology and research design

> *I interview because I am interested in other people's stories*
> (Seidman, 2006, p.6)

What follows is the methods section. Because this was a qualitative study, I was interested in understanding "how the social, historical and cultural factors might shape the study itself as

well as the participants' goals, values and experiences" (Kirsch, 1999, p. 51). To address my research questions effectively, I relied primarily on the girls' voices. Because I wanted to understand the girls' experiences and identity from their perspective, I begin by explaining the methodological choices I made based on my theoretical frameworks and research questions. My goal was to capture data on the perceptions of my "actors from the inside through a process of deep attentiveness and empathetic understanding" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 6). I then proceed to describe my participants and the process of selecting them. In the final section, I account for my positionality as a researcher of African descent working with participants from the continent of Africa in a "foreign" context. Hertz (1997) claims that by providing personal accounts, researchers become aware of how their own positions and interests shape their study, "from the questions they ask to those they ignore, from the problem formation to analysis, representation and writing" (p. 76). In this regard, I address the opportunities and obstacles that this situation might have presented in the course of my study.

It is about stories

This study is based on the stories of four immigrant girls from Africa: Belinda, Dhahabu, Angela and Zura. Their stories detail their lived experiences as students in two public high schools in a small Mid-Western town. These stories are about how their identity shaped their schooling experiences. Specifically, this was a study about African immigrant girls' subjective identities in school. The study was born from the fact that there are few stories about the educational experiences of African immigrant students. As such, I relied mainly on participants' narratives to illuminate their day-to-day lives in school.

Focusing on personal narratives was important for a study such as this for a number of reasons. First, the stories the girls told about their lives help illuminate their day-to-day lives in

school. According to Maynes, Peirce and Laslett (2008), stories are not just about the individual but are embedded in history, social relationships and structures. The subjective nature of stories or personal narratives allows researchers to see and understand the connection between the social and the individual which was a goal of this study. Because stories provide access to individuals' "emotions, motivations and imaginations" (Maynes, et al., 2008, p. 5), I was able to capture the "subjective dimensions of social actions that have been shaped by participants' cumulative life experiences" (p. 5).

Secondly, using personal narratives was appropriate for this study because narratives bring prior untold stories (such as those of African immigrants) to the fore. To this end, stories serve as "sources of counter-narratives to undermine misleading generalizations, correct commonly misused analytic categories or refute historical claims based on other types of evidence" (Maynes et al., 2008 p. 8). For instance, by not addressing the experiences of girls of color in her book *Reviving Ophelia*, Pipher (1994) assumed that issues White girls grappled with, are universal issues afflicting all girls in a similar manner. One such misconception that has since been addressed includes some of the conclusions she drew regarding girls' views of their bodies. Even though her findings were based mainly on the experiences of White, middle-class girls, without distinguishing their racial or ethnic background, she reported that girls were affected negatively by the standards set by mass culture. However, it has since been established that Black girls are more capable of resisting these pressures compared to White girls, and consequently maintain a strong sense of self and self-esteem (Fordham, 1993).

I went into the study wanting to give space for agency, and I indeed found evidence that suggested that the girls did have agency. In this regard, personal narratives allow for the understanding of agency, which Giddens (1984) defines as the capacity for an individual to act

differently in a given situation. Agency was an important focus because the girls in the study often depicted behaviors that were against "dominant" norms of girlhood. From this perspective, personal narratives allow us to see the connections between "individual agency, [and] the historical and socially embedded self constructions" (Maynes et al., 2006, p. 23). Unlike other empirical methods, which reduce individuals to "clusters of variables such as race, ethnicity, and gender" (Maynes et al., 2006, p. 23), personal narratives focus on individuals as whole beings, whose lived experiences are shaped by their contexts.

Regarding the number of participants for the study, I wanted a number to be able to collect sufficient and in-depth data for the questions I wanted to explore. In this study, four participants seemed manageable and practical enough for a qualitative study that would be conducted by a sole investigator.

This being a qualitative study, it was also important to me to consider my participants' worldviews. As I interpreted participants' stories, I took into account that immigrants come to the U.S. for various reasons, and that these reasons shape their perception of their new environment. Interpretive research posits that human beings construct meanings according to their contexts or their frame of reference as they engage with the world in which they live (Creswell, 1998). In this regard, I recognize that my participants came to the study with a particular worldview based on their day-to-day experiences.

Capturing stories and personal narratives through in-depth phenomenological interviews

Data for this study were collected between March and October, 2010. Intensive interviewing was the central technique employed. Seidman (2006) asserts that we interview so that we can come to understand participants' experiences through their stories. He reiterates that in order to understand people's experiences and the meanings they make out of those

experiences, interviews are the best way to go. Personal narratives and stories are based on "retrospective first person accounts of individual's lives" (p. 7). With interviews, claims Seidman, researchers can capture participants' stories. Participant observation in and out of school was used to supplement the interview data. In addition, I analyzed school-related documents and artifacts for a more in-depth comprehension of participants' schooling experiences.

I conducted a total of six interviews with each participant. Each interview lasted an average of one hour. However, interviews with Belinda were slightly shorter on average, because she always had to rush home to take care of her younger siblings. When I suggested I could conduct the interview at her house so that she would not have to worry about her siblings or getting home late, Belinda responded that she preferred doing the interviews while at school. When possible, I let participants choose where they wanted the interviews to take place. Most of the time, I conducted the interviews in their homes in the evenings and after school. Some of the interviews were conducted in fast-food restaurants, others were conducted in the local public libraries. Participants preferred that we meet right after school, during weekdays. However, there were times when their schedule did not allow for weekday meetings, and therefore we met over the weekend. For instance, when they had exams, or sports practice after school, they would request weekend meetings.

The methodological approach I took was premised on phenomenological inquiry, a research method that is primarily concerned with understanding the meaning of events and interactions from the participants' perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2005). Given its exploratory and descriptive nature, a phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study as I sought to gain a deeper understanding of the girls' lived experiences. To accomplish this, I employed

in-depth phenomenologically-based interviewing (Seidman, 1991), an approach which combines "life history interviewing and in-depth focused interviewing" (p. 15). Life history interviewing allowed me to focus on the girls' personal narratives or stories. According to Seidman (2006), the goal of in-depth interviews is neither to "get answers to questions, nor to test hypothesis, nor to evaluate, but to understand people's lived experiences and the meanings they make from these experiences" (p. 9). Still, Seidman recognizes that even though as researchers we can never fully understand participants, we can try to understand their actions. Interviewing, he asserts, allows researchers to appreciate participants' actions and behaviors because they provide contexts for those actions.

Seidman's three interview series

Lived experiences, according to Barkley (2009), can only be understood through sharing of stories and memories. Memory making, he adds, is socially influenced – that is, people and places of our lived experiences shape our memories and stories. This study can be viewed as hermeneutic phenomenological research in that it is both descriptive and interpretive (Olafson, 2006; Van Manen, 1990). In the study, I adopted Seidman's three interview series to avoid what Seidman describes as "treading on thin contextual line" (p. 15). For the interviews, I used open-ended questions with the goal of "building upon and exploring participants' responses to questions" (p. 15). Seidman's three series interview was employed as described below.

The aim of the first series of interviews was to establish the context of the interviewees' experiences. Seidman refers to this first stage as the *focused life history stage*. Here the researcher should ask participants to tell him or her as much as they can about their lives in light of the topic under study. In this first stage, I broadly sought to understand participants' range of lived experiences, especially those related to schooling. Because their identity and experiences

were important for me to explore, I encouraged my participants to narrate their past schooling experiences before and after they relocated to the U.S. Specifically, I asked them to describe how they felt on their first day attending an American school. I also asked them to describe the schools they attended back in their home countries, if they liked those schools and how similar or different they were from the ones they were currently attending in the U.S. I asked them about their friends back in their home countries and if they still kept in touch. Seidman advises that at this stage of interviewing, rather than focus on the "why," we should focus on the "how" (p. 17).

The second stage of interviewing focuses on the *details of experience*. In this stage, participants are asked to reconstruct the details of their experiences within the context in which they occur. Here, my goal was to understand participants' present schooling experiences. Seidman describes the second interview stage as one where the interviewer asks the respondents to give concrete details of their present lived experiences. In this case, I asked them to narrate their day-to-day experiences in school from the time their first class began to the time they went home. I asked them to describe how their classes were structured, who they did or did not hang out with when at school. I asked them about their extra-curricular activities - which activities they preferred or disliked, and why. I similarly focused on their relationships with teachers and peers. Studies such as Conchas (2002) and Stanton-Salazar (2004, 2010) among others have established the link between minority students' knowledge about school structure and their academic outcomes. Because one of the goals for this study was to understand these girls' academic outcomes, it was necessary that I explore their understanding of the structural aspects of their schools.

In the final stage of interviewing, known as *reflection on meaning*, I encouraged my participants to reflect on the meaning the experiences they described held for them. At this final

stage of interviewing, participants were required to look at how the different aspects of their lives functioned interactively to lead to their present situation. Seidman adds that this last stage could also take a future orientation. As such, I asked participants about their educational and career aspirations – what they wanted to do with their lives after school, including if they wanted to go back to their native countries or not.

As part of the interview process, I also used school-related artifacts to generate in-depth conversation about participants' schools. Artifacts, in this case, were used as symbolic representations of various aspects of school. The kind of artifacts they chose was also a reflection, not only of who these girls were, but also what they thought about school and schooling. From these artifacts, I was able to gain a more detailed understanding of their schooling processes and practices. For instance, Zura's artifact included a school yearbook. The yearbook documented different aspects of high school life. These included clubs and school organization, volunteer work in the school and local communities, and sports and academic activities. In addition, the yearbook documented different kinds of school activities that took place throughout the school year. These included study abroad trips to different parts of the world, volunteer activities, and special events such as prom and school formals. Zura's artifact led to a rich conversation that enlightened me about these schooling processes. For her artifact, Dhahabu brought her school ID card. When I asked her why she chose her ID card, she explained lightheartedly, "Without it I cannot eat." She added that her school ID also reaffirmed her identity as a student, and that without it most teachers would not recognize that she was a student.

Diversity Toss in affirming identity

As mentioned earlier, one of my goals for this study was to understand how these girls defined and positioned themselves and their understanding of how other people defined them. I began this study assuming the salience of race, ethnicity and gender. I quickly realized that while these markers were important to the girls, they were not necessarily salient in their lives. Holland et al. (1998) advise us against such presumptions by arguing that individuals develop degrees of salience based on their social situations and histories. I adapted Sonia Nieto's "diversity toss" to uncover which of their identities these girls thought were important. I had used this activity with prospective teachers in an undergraduate course I taught. With pre-service teachers, I used the activity to help my students think about issues of identity when teaching diverse learners. In this study, I altered the original version. Instead of doing it collectively as I did with my pre-service teachers, this time the activity was done as part of an individual interview with each girl.

I began by giving out five blank index cards. I then asked the girls to write down on each card an identity that best defined them. When they completed the cards, I then asked them to select an identity to give up, one by one, beginning with the one they thought was least important to them. Each time they would give up an identity, I would ask them to explain the reason why. In the end, they each remained with two of their most important identities. All four girls seemed to struggle when I asked them to give up one of the last two identities. For instance, Zura had a difficult time giving up on either her Nuban or Christian identity. She explained that being Nuban is "almost just as important" as her Christian faith. She finally gave up her Nuban identity but explained, "God gave me everything that I have and if I had to choose between God

and something else that he gave me, I would rather choose God because he might give me more and better things. My Christian beliefs matter to me more than anything else."

Table 1: Summary of diversity toss[3]

Participant	1	2	3	4	5
Angela	Age	African	Faith	Name	Girl
Zura	Girl	Personality	Sudanese	Nuba	Christian
Belinda	African	Student	Name	Female	Christian
Dhahabu	Girl	Burundian/ Tanzanian	Christian	African	student

The identities the four girls chose as salient said a lot about how they viewed themselves. The meanings they gave to the identities they thought salient was fascinating. Even though this activity was done with each girl at different times, they nevertheless gave different reasons for choosing or dropping the identity in question. Christianity was one such identity. Interestingly, both Belinda and Zura chose Christianity as their salient identity.

The Diversity Toss not only allowed me to highlight the contradictions in these girls' identity formation, it also allowed me to see how the identities of these girls shifted in time and space. For example, just like Belinda, Zura professed deep commitment to Christianity, yet she still embraced what Belinda, my conservative participant would consider "worldly pleasures." Belinda, on the other hand, appeared not to compromise her faith at any point. She was very clear about what her faith means to her.

At the same time, it was surprising to me that student identity was most salient to the girl who appeared to be struggling the most in school. Dhahabu's future aspirations seemed to shape how she constructed her identity. She wanted to go to college and become a banker, and she believed that school would serve as the channel to achieve those goals. In contrast, the high

[3] The table above is the summary chart of Diversity Toss activity. 1 is the first identity that the girls gave up. Number 5 are the ones that the girls remained with at the end of the activity, meaning these were their most prized identities.

achieving student, Angela, did not name "student" as one of her salient identities, even though there were clear indications that being a student was very important to her. It was also interesting to note that while African identity was one of the important identities for each, none of the girls regarded it as the most salient identity in their lives. A point worth noting was the importance of gender in these girls' lives. Whether they called themselves "girls" or "females," they stated being female was important to them. (I explore these points in more depth in Chapters Five and Six). The Diversity Toss activity sparked lively discussions about identity. Not only did it open up conversations about identity, but it also reaffirmed prior conversations about identity.

Supplementing interviews

To supplement the interviews, participants were observed in different settings, including outside of school and some extra-curricular activities. In crafting this study, my focus was on the "whole person," and to do this effectively I had to focus on multiple aspects of my participants' lives. Studying the whole person involves considering the individual both as unique and as connected to the social and cultural worlds and the relationships that affect the person's life. Participant observation allowed me to do this. In this study, participant observation was more about observation than participation (Agar, 1995). On many of these occasions, I observed rather than immersed myself fully into my participants' lives.

Field notes were written right after the observations were completed and when memory of the observations was still fresh in my mind. I observed participants at soccer and track practices, and at clubs such as the African Students Association. Wise and Fine (2000) note that the out-of-schooling context is just as important in shaping youth's identities as the schooling context. I observed Angela and Zura once each in their soccer matches. I observed Angela at

one of her track training sessions. During these observations, I wanted to further understand how they interacted with their peers in non-instructional settings. I believe spaces such as track or club meetings, where the students are sometimes in charge of themselves, can reveal a lot about students' identity. Most of the observations, however, were done at their homes while I conducted the interviews. Recognizing the role family has in influencing students' educational outcomes, these observations allowed me to have a greater understanding of these girls' family relations. In addition, I attended several community functions, including picnics and funerals. These were non-school events that gave me an opportunity to observe how the four girls fit in and interacted with their larger community.

Observations were particularly useful in Dhahabu's case. Because I was able to observe her in out-of-school contexts, I saw other aspects of Dhahabu that did not become apparent during the interviews, in part because of language difficulties (a point I will revisit in a later chapter). In the course of the study, one of her peers, a Burundian boy who was a close family friend, passed away unexpectedly. He was 18 years old and about to graduate from high school when he fell sick and died suddenly. Being a close family friend, Dhahabu and her family were very much involved with his funeral arrangements. Yet, this was not just a family affair. It touched the whole Burundian community, who rallied behind the family and offered both emotional and financial support. Dhahabu was very active throughout this event. At the funeral, she sat with and consoled the bereaved family. She was also part of the choir that sang during the funeral. In addition, she volunteered as an usher during the fundraiser for the funeral.

My observations of her involvement around the funeral helped me see that Dhahabu was not as involved in school as she was within the Burundian community. Dhahabu was not engaged in much of the extra-curricular activities at school and neither did she have meaningful

relationships with any of her teachers other than her ESL teacher, a point I address in a later chapter. It is possible, then, that Dhahabu could afford to forego relationships at school because she had more meaningful ones within her community. The point I am making here is that through observations, I was able to catch glimpses of other aspects of Dhahabu's life that I might not have realized if interviews were the sole method of collecting data.

Data analysis

I transcribed the interview data myself. Transcription was done immediately after the interviews and was done verbatim. Seidman (2006) posits that every word that a participant speaks reflects his or her own consciousness. Seidman cautions researchers against substituting participants' words because to do so is to substitute their consciousness. Data analysis was ongoing as I collected data (Miles & Huberman, 1984). I recognize that I have predispositions that might have shaped my transcription and analysis process. Like Laurie Thorpe (2003), my goal was not to read the transcripts as a set of categories for which I wanted to find excerpts; rather, the categories arose out of the passages that I marked as interesting. Data were continuously analyzed as interviewing went on. This approach helped me develop and ask follow-up questions in subsequent interviews. Participants' responses were then coded manually by marking each unit of analysis with the emerging coding categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

On analysis, Seidman advises that a researcher should not only approach his or her data with an open attitude "seeking what emerges as important from the text" (p. 117) but should also be cognizant of the bias against or for the topic under study. To this end, data were coded and categorized inductively and deductively (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). One set of codes, which included 15 codes, was developed prior to the study. These codes were informed by other studies in the field. These codes were developed from my reading of the literature on immigrant

education and girl culture. I came up with specific codes such as race, ethnicity, gender, dressing, body, diversity, interaction with peers, among other codes. These codes were developed in line with the research questions. A second set of codes emerged during data analysis. These included codes such as national identity, religiosity, diversity, and language. Themes were then generated using both sets of these codes.

For reliability purposes, I regularly checked with my participants to ensure that I was representing their views correctly. After transcribing the interviews, I would read out some of their responses to them and ask them if I presented their views correctly. In addition, sometimes I shared manuscripts of analyzed data with study participants. The multiple levels of interviews also gave me a chance to check with my respondents. Other times, I discussed emerging themes with colleagues familiar with my project (Hovart & Antonio, 1999). Specifically, I shared ideas from my analysis with colleagues working on issues of identity and schooling.

Research Participants and my Role as a Researcher

Unforeseen challenges in recruiting participants

In his very thoughtfully written book, *Tales of the Field*, phenomenologist John Van Maanen (1988) wisely states that doing fieldwork requires some instincts of an exile, "for the field worker typically arrives at a place of study without much of introduction and knowing few people, if any" (p. 2). These words deeply resonate with me. Indeed, the initial stages of this study felt like exile. I had been naïve to think that by the mere fact that I was an African, recruiting African girls would be an easy task. For this reason, I was under the assumption that my "insiderness" would facilitate the process. I quickly realized that this was going to be a challenge. Where to find and how to approach participants became a major concern for me. How was I going to recruit participants for the study, given that I personally did not know any

African girls in high school? Yes, I had been in the United States for a couple of years and even knew some African families, but I was doubtful that these families would let their daughters participate in my study.

These concerns were not at all baseless. According to Van Maanen (2006), "accidents and happenstance shapes fieldwork study as much as planning and foresight" (p. 2). This is a lesson that I learnt even before I had began the study. In anticipation of the study, I had approached some families with high school daughters the year before and explained to them the purposes of my study. The parents I spoke with seemed to be on board with the study. They agreed and reassured me this would not be a problem when the time came. These families, I figured, would introduce me to other families with daughters in high school. In my opinion, I had set an adequate ground for my study. I did not expect derailment of any sort in my research trajectory. Yet, the harsh realities of research hit me two months before I was to begin my fieldwork. The parents of my prospective participants suddenly informed me that their daughters would not be part of the study. Needless to say, I was surprised, as I had not prepared for this. The two families had given me their word and reassured me about their daughters' participation. For a year, I had kept contact and had met with them on several occasions, but they never once showed reluctance to participate. When this mishap occurred, I had already recruited three girls, and I was confident they were going to participate. Now I had only one participant, and even though her parents had not shown signs of reneging, my confidence plummeted greatly. Naturally, I suspected they would also pull their daughter out of my study.

When I asked what caused them to change their mind, one parent informed me that the school guidance counselor advised that given the "nature of the study," she did not believe the student's state of mind at the time would handle the nature of questions I was planning on

asking. This was surprising because I had not spoken to the counselor about my research. The second parent also informed me that she was uneasy with her family's story being "out there." I tried to reassure them that I would guarantee confidentiality to protect them, but to no avail. They certainly had a right to withdraw from the study. They had not signed a contract with me and of course, research ethics stipulate that participants can leave a study at any stage if they wish. This incident still was a surprise and an eye-opener reminding me that qualitative researchers do not have total control of the trajectory of their study. In the end, I was able to overcome this shortcoming and even recruited an extra participant in anticipation of one withdrawing from the study.

Relationship with participants

There are many relationships that can influence the trajectory of a research study. The relationship a researcher has with research participants is one such factor. In this study, the interactions I had with the girls affected the kind of information they shared with me. I believe I was able to make a better analysis of the girls that I knew best and had deeper relationships with. For instance, I was able to provide a deeper analysis of Angela than the other three girls because I knew her family relatively well, better than I did the other participants. I had known Angela's mother prior to the research and maintained a good relationship with her after the research ended. Because of this, it was easy for Angela to open up to me. When I needed to, her mother also helped clarify or confirm Angela's accounts of events. In contrast, I never met any of Belinda's family members. She never provided the opportunity for me to meet her family. Even though such a contact would have been helpful in my analysis of her, I could not push or insist on this. As a result, there are some aspects of Belinda's life that I am still not clear on. One of the questions was her immigration status. I had asked the girls to tell me how and why they came to

this country. This way, I was able to ascertain their immigration status. When I asked Belinda how she came to this country, she responded that her family came to pursue opportunities that America offers when compared to her home country. As I will explain in the next chapter, given her background and my analysis of timelines of various events in her life, I suspect that Belinda was a refugee, even though she never articulated this. She never spoke of her life in a refugee camp; neither did she, at any time, refer to herself as a refugee. I explain this point in detail in the next chapter. This did pose a challenge to my presentation of Belinda compared to the other three girls for whom I had a much better sense of their lives.

Researcher positionality

As I began the study, I tried to find any literature that could help alleviate my anxiety about conducting research in an "unfamiliar" setting. There is a plethora of writing about the experiences of women from "First World" countries and White women conducting research in "The Third World" or with marginalized populations. White, middle-class and educated women of color have long written about the struggles and challenges that they encounter conducting research in unfamiliar settings. Differences emanating from social class, level of education, ethnicity, race, and nationality have long posed challenges for researchers working with marginalized populations. These differences are especially compounded when the researcher is a woman, particularly because of the cultural norms regarding the place of a woman in most non-Western settings.

However, I could not find any study highlighting the experiences of researchers like me, "Third World" women conducting research in "First World" settings. Because of feminist research, issues of representation in Social Science research have taken center stage in the recent past (Wolf, 1996). Feminist research acknowledges the difficulties faced by women researchers

when negotiating their identity in the field, because, as Wolf (1996) asserts, they have been in the forefront calling for more ethical and reflective ways of conducting research.

I believe that my positionality as a woman studying women might have led to deeper insights into the young women's lives. Feminist theories postulate that one's position as a woman is crucial in gaining knowledge and understanding of other women. Feminist standpoint theories posit that because of their "embodied subjectivity," women researchers have made important epistemological contributions to research on women (Wolf, 1996, p. 20). Because of this shared standpoint, women researchers can gain more understanding and knowledge of the lives of other women. Still, this claim has been faulted for failing to take into account the diversity in women's lives. Critics argue there is no single standpoint for women of racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds. They argue that women's experiences are shaped by their cultural contexts. In what she terms as *situated knowledge,* Donna Haraway (1991) contends that we all have partial knowledge regardless of our position within the social hierarchy, thus no position is privileged over another.

When conducting her fieldwork in Fargo, North Dakota, anthropologist Faye Ginsburg (1998) highlights the importance of accounting for researcher positionality. She found that just as she was curious about the people she was studying, they were equally curious about her. In this regard, Wolf (1996) posits that while in the field, a researcher might realize that she is also the "other." Researchers must then deal with "two forms of *reflexivity* – the *self* as both *object* and *subject* and the *other as an observer and the observed"* (Wolf, 1996, p. 34). As an African woman who recently immigrated to the U.S. and who was seeking to study African girls, I could certainly claim some "insider" and "partial" knowledge that helped ease my entry to and interaction with participants. I believe that the families allowed me access to their daughters

because of our shared African heritage. Indeed, they told me this on several occasions. In addition, I could also tell that they viewed me as a role model for their daughters. The parents felt that being African and a woman pursuing her PhD at a highly respected university, I could be a source of inspiration to their daughters. Often when I went to pick the girls up for an interview, the parents asked me to encourage the girls to work hard in school to achieve educational success "just like you." They were similarly interested in various aspects of my life. For instance, they inquired about the process of university admission and my experiences as a doctoral student, what I wanted to do with myself when I completed my studies, and whether I wanted to return home upon completion of my studies, among other questions.

Seeking solace in feminist research

Similar to Wolf (1996), this study was conducted by a *woman with rather than on women*. Thus, the methodological stance rests on feminist principles of research. According to Wolf (1996), issues of power relations, positionality, and ethical concerns have become particularly relevant to social scientists. In this regard, Wolf (1996) posits that the field poses challenges for feminist researchers because of the power relations inherent in the research process. She further asserts that the challenges become even more complex when the research focus is on Third World women or women of color, since most of this research entails studying down (my own emphasis) or studying women who are poor. She further posits that power differentials can be manifested in the following ways: (1) differences in researcher positionality and the researched (these differences include race, ethnicity, social class, and nationality); (2) "power exerted through the research process" and (3) power exerted during and after field work – "in writing and representing" (p. 2).

As a result of the above concerns, and as a researcher studying a marginalized group, I was definitely cognizant of my positionality as a researcher. There were many differences between me and my participants that could cause hierarchical interactions. The age difference was one concern. I believe that my being older than the participants might have deterred them from freely sharing their thoughts on some issues. For instance, in the "African" culture, it is not very respectful for teenagers to interact freely with the opposite sex, and girls who do this are considered deviant and of questionable morals. Considering this, I believe that the girls might have not been very forthright about their position on dating. In their narratives, these four girls wanted to be seen as good girls. This was especially apparent when describing their African-American peers (a point I discuss in a later chapter). It was important that people distinguish them from their African-American peers, whom they considered as having questionable morals because they freely interacted with their male peers at school. Therefore, despite sharing the "African" ethnicity, these girls could have still viewed me as an "outsider" due to my age, education, and other social markers.

There were other occasions too that my "insiderness" posed dilemmas while in the field. Because of my "shared African heritage" with the girls, there were experiences that resonated with me, and on these occasions I would unconsciously infer my own meanings on the subject and consequently miss the opportunity to ask follow-up questions. For instance, I could relate very well with the girls when they complained about their strict upbringing. Participants were frustrated with their parents and complained bitterly about being "locked up." My sisters and I grew up in a very strict household. My father restricted our time out of the house, and we were not allowed to interact with boys much. In retrospect, this was very frustrating for me and my sisters, and we eagerly planned for "liberation" when we would finally leave for college.

Participants expressed similar sentiments. This concern resonated with me to the extent that initially, I did not follow-up with appropriate questions. I believe this could have been an opportunity for a richer discussion on gender differences in the participants' upbringing. I did eventually follow-up on this subject and had a productive discussion at a later interview. In this regard, Ajawwi & Higgs (2007) posit that research is value-bound by the nature of the questions being asked, the values held by the researcher, and the ways findings are generated and interpreted. For this reason, as the research progressed, I had to account for the findings that emerged from the interactions between me as the researcher and my participants. My frame of reference in this case was concomitantly informed by my marginal status (as an African, woman and a foreigner in the U.S.) and my advanced educational and "middle class" status.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by delineating studies that have been conducted to explain girls' lives. I made the case that while numerous studies have been conducted in the field in the attempt to understand girls' lived realities, limited attention has been paid to diversity in girls' lives. Research is equally limited on how immigrant girls experience school. I cited some of the few studies that have attempted to bridge this gap. Saroub (2005), Lee (2001), and Ekema-Agbaw (2001) are some of the studies cited in the review of immigrant students' experiences. What is missing from this review, however, are more stories of African immigrant girls. Not much is known about how this group experiences school. In the same vein, while I was interested in the structural issues that affect girls' schooling, I was more interested in the micro issues, the everyday realities, of these girls. To this end, I posed several interrelated research questions that attempted to capture the complexity of these girls' lives. To address these questions effectively, I used interviewing as my primary method of data collection. In the second

part of this chapter, I addressed how and why I made the choice of the methods employed in this study. Because the methodology was premised on feminist research, my positionality was important to me as a researcher. To stay true to this goal, I addressed how my status as an African woman affected my fieldwork. What follows in the next chapter are participants' portraits. In that chapter, I provide readers a glimpse into the lives of these four girls that will help contextualize their schooling experiences.

CHAPTER THREE

PRESENTATION THROUGH PORTRAITS: CAPTURING THE COMPLEX AND THE AESTHETIC

This chapter is a biography of the four girls. This dissertation could not be complete without providing the "life drawings" of these girls (Lightfoot & Davies, 1997, p. 5). As I emphasized in the previous chapter, I wanted to highlight participants' experiences in their own voices. Through portraits, I wanted to capture the "richness, complexity and dimensionality" of these girls' experiences in their social and cultural contexts (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3). This way, I could highlight the girls' voices. In their classic, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind*, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) made the choice to "listen to women only" (p. 7). In a similar manner, because my goal was to understand how African immigrant girls experience school, I relied solely on girls' voices – African immigrant girls.

In this study, I explored multiple dimensions of the girls' lives, and did this holistically. Therefore, in writing about these girls, I did not just focus on their lives at school but also on other aspects of their lives that have shaped their schooling experiences. I wanted to capture these girls' lives and present the young women as alive and dynamic human beings. As such, I focus on the intersections of various facets of their lives.

In the portraits that follow, I begin by providing a brief background of the girls' lives. For each girl, I describe her family background, and her physical and personality traits. I believe this will help us contextualize these girls' experiences and "points of view" about schooling. Given that girls experience school in part as a result of their gender, I focus on their lived experiences as immigrant girls attending public high schools. In this chapter, I also attend to their personal histories of migration, specifically when, how and why they relocated to the U.S. I was

intrigued by the ways in which these girls chose to identify themselves regarding their immigration status. None of the girls referred to themselves as refugees, even though I believed that a number of them were. Neither did they use the label immigrant. The only one who came close to identifying her immigrant status was Angela, who identified herself as an international student.

In addition, I briefly describe their educational and career aspirations. All four girls were optimistic about the future. I address how this played out in the face of some of the adversities they faced everyday in school as "immigrant girls." Finally, I address how the degree of my interaction with each girl may have impacted my analysis of them. I interacted and knew these girls in different ways. Some I knew more deeply than others. I knew Belinda much less compared to the other three participants, while I had the most frequent interaction with Angela. This, of course, had implications for how I am able to understand and present each of them.

Belinda: A devout Christian

Field notes: Interview one with Belinda, March 26, 2010

I was scheduled to meet Belinda at 2.30pm, right after school ends on Friday, March 26, 2010. This was to be my first meeting with her. This day was also significant because it was my birthday. I had called her the night before and arranged to meet at the school library. She was the only participant that I had not had prior contact with. I had, however, spoken to her several times on phone. I arrived at the school at around 2.15 and headed straight to the library where I sat waiting for her to arrive. I did not have a picture of her and had not asked for a description of her, from her uncle who introduced us. As I sat there waiting, I reassured myself that as an African, it would be easy for me to pick out an African girl from the rest of the girls who were streaming into the library. Prior to our meeting, I had informed her that I would be sitting in the corner of the library with my laptop open so that she can easily identify me.

Ten minutes passed, then twenty, still no sign of Belinda. As I sat there pondering if she was ever going to show up, a girl walked into room. Instinctively, I knew she was Belinda. As the girl entered the room, I couldn't help but notice how different she appeared from the rest of the students entering the library. She was dressed in a long, black, woolen skirt that stretched down to her knees. She wore no makeup and her hair was pushed back. "This must be Belinda" I thought, as she walked towards my direction. My hopes were dashed when she walked and sat at

a computer without much of a glance in my direction. While at the computer, she briefly glanced in my direction and our eyes met for a split second - she did not smile, flinch or acknowledge me in any way. I must be wrong, I figured. I sat there looking at the door, eagerly waiting for Belinda to show up. Another ten minutes or so, the girl at computer rose from her seat and came towards me, and I realized I was right after all. She came, sat opposite me and introduced herself as Belinda. While she did not apologize, she acknowledged her lateness by explaining that she had to print her homework as she does not have a printer at home. I assured her it was alright, as long as she had made it. "I have to be home in forty-five minutes" were Belinda's first words when I turned my recorder on. When I asked her why, she explained that she is the one who takes care of her younger siblings when her parents and older sisters go to work in the evening. I assured her that the interview will be completed in good time.

Belinda is an 18-year-old girl. She was Congolese. She is soft-spoken, of slight build, average height and speaks with an accent. Belinda has three younger siblings and three older siblings. Both of her parents work menial jobs. Her mother worked at a local eatery and a retail store. Her father was a factory worker. Her older sisters also worked at different retail stores in the city. Before you get to know her, Belinda seems a bit detached, introverted and almost has an air of self-righteousness when you talked to her. For instance, before the interview, whenever I tried to engage her in "small talk," she would give short, curt answers, almost without interest. At times Belinda could be critical of people who do not share her worldview. For example, she did not speak highly of women who wear trousers. These views also became apparent when describing her peers, many of whom she found to be "rude," "sarcastic" and sometimes "promiscuous."

In the Diversity Toss activity, Belinda revealed her salient identities as her Christianity, ethnicity, race, student identity and her name. However, Christianity was most salient to her. It was apparent that religion had a big influence in Belinda's life. It shaped the ways in which she viewed and comported herself. Religion also informed her views about schooling, particularly how she positioned herself and others in school, and the relationships she had with her peers and teachers. Religion also shapes her views about gender, particularly, the ways in which a woman

should carry herself. Religion was also significant in shaping Belinda's future goals. It had definitely influenced her educational and career aspirations. Belinda declared that she could give up everything including school, career and even her family, if she were forced to choose between school and her Christian faith. She explained herself:

> I will stop coming to school if I was told to choose between God and school. For me, it is better I please God than worldly stuff because I can be like a student but there will come a day that I depart from this world. God will judge me by my faith. He won't look at me like a student or anything else or that I got A's or I am having this and that. NO! It will only depend on the Christian life I lead on this earth. So it is better I chose Christianity than other stuff.

This did not mean that school was not important to Belinda. It was. In fact, her student identity was one of the five salient identities she picked in the Diversity Toss activity. Belinda planned to go to college and wanted to be an international banker. Still, her Christian beliefs overrode her educational and career plans. Belinda emphasized her position as follows:

> If you put all the stuff that you do or you are, it's not important because I can do all these things like go to school, get a diploma, be who I am, an African but those won't matter the day I die. They will all remain here when I go wherever I leave this earth and it won't matter. There is nothing like you were a professional or African. Those things won't matter because they are earthly stuff. One day everybody leaves and dies. So it's important to know where you are going.

I was surprised, however, to find out that Belinda and her family did not espouse "conventional" Christian beliefs or practices. Rather than go to church on Sundays like other Christians do, Belinda and her family gathered each Sunday morning to worship in their living room, with her father as the designated preacher. Her family strictly believed in the teachings of William Marion Branham, whom she called a prophet. Branham passed away in 1965 but his "message lives on," according to Belinda. Brahmanism, or what his followers call "the end time message," preaches against denominationalism, and his adherents believe that William Branham was the last prophet of God. According to Belinda, Brahmanism espouses beliefs about the end

of the world. "No one knows when it will come," claimed Belinda. As a follower of Brahmanism, Belinda lived her life in preparation for the "end of the world" and in her view nothing else in life, including school, was as important as preparing for that day.

I found Belinda "different" from typical teenagers[4] not just in physical appearance, but also the way she carries herself and her convictions. On the first day I met Belinda, I was struck by how different she looked from other girls I had encountered in the hallways. I remember that day vividly. It was a warm spring day and summer was fast approaching. As I described in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter, she definitely stood out in her long woolen skirt that stretched down to her ankles. She wore a dark-colored, heavy, long, baggy sweater that covered her behind. She also had on dark stockings with black shoes. Her thick coarse hair was brushed back modestly and tied into a tight ponytail. This was the type of clothing that she wore on all the days I met with her. Judging from her dressing and outward comportment, I could tell she came from a very modest background. Despite her seemingly modest demeanor, Belinda regarded herself very highly and did not seek her peers' approval for anything. In the attempt to understand the influence of mass culture on my participants' schooling experiences, I had asked them which celebrity they viewed as beautiful and why. I was specifically struck by Belinda's response. She looked me straight in the eye and proudly stated, "I think I am beautiful. You have to look at yourself and believe in yourself before you look at someone else. I just look at myself and not another person when I think of beauty. You have to believe in yourself as a girl."

[4] My view of the typical teenager is informed by my reading of literature on girlhood and youth. In my view, typical teenagers are characterized by their modes of dressing, ways in which they interact with friends (most like to "hang out" with friends with whom they share values and world views,) engage in various activities in school and church, and interact with technology, among other things. For instance, Belinda is the only one of the four girls who did not have a Facebook account. According to Belinda, Facebook is a "waste of time."

Her confidence in herself was also evident in her views about clothes. As I mentioned earlier, Belinda did not conform to youth norms of dressing and looks. Belinda set her own standards on how she dressed when she went to school. When I asked her about her views on clothes, she stated confidently, "I dress in my own way! I dress the way I feel. If I feel something will look nice on me, I put it on. I really don't care what others say or think about me." Maybe it is because she watched very little TV and therefore had been sheltered from pressures that many girls face as a result of popular culture. Watching TV for Belinda was limited to Christian programs, soccer and a few cartoon programs, including "Tom and Jerry and Scooby Doo." Even though Belinda did not set her standards of dressing based on external influences, it was still important to her that she "looks nice."

An additional aspect that distinguished Belinda from her teenage peers was friends or lack thereof. As stated earlier, Belinda's worldview was significantly shaped by her Christianity, including her views of friendship and belonging. Belinda claimed to have no friends in or outside of school, yet she gave no indication of being unhappy, sad or lonely. In fact she almost seemed proud of her "solitude." She was always in a rush to get home after school and never hung around to interact or chat with her classmates like I observed other students do at the end of the school day. In her view, friendship is based on some mutual understanding. She distinguished herself morally from her peers and believed she had nothing in common with them because they were "rude, sarcastic, disrespectful and they drink, smoke and do drugs." With a look of disdain, she stated, "many students like to fight and are mean to each other." Furthermore, given her conservative views on dressing, she also did not want to make friends with the girls at her school because "they dress very disrespectfully." She did not understand why some students come to school dressed in the way they do. She wondered if these students really cared for their "image."

However, Belinda did not believe she is missing out on anything because of lack of friends; after all, she had her large family who she considered to be both more fun and more respectful.

Belinda's Christian faith also informed her opinion on gender. She conformed to the traditional norms about clothing where pants are considered to be men's clothing. At our first meeting I had on a pair of jeans and a shirt. In the course of the interview she revealed her disdain for women who wear pants. According to Belinda, pants are men's clothing, "because the Bible says so." Her Christian identity not only shapes how she defined herself but also how she defined people around her. Naturally, Belinda's perspective on dressing influenced my choice of clothing. Because I did not want her views of me to distract her from the interview, rather than wear jeans as I usually did on a regular weekday, on the days I met Belinda, I deliberately wore dresses and skirts to make her feel comfortable.

Regarding` her ethnic and national background, Belinda was born in Congo but moved to Zambia when she was a toddler. However, she claimed not to know why her family moved to Zambia because she was young at the time. However, I suspect that she might not have been comfortable sharing this with me. Surprisingly, she had never been curious to find out why they moved from Congo[5]. Her father is Congolese and her mother is Zambian. Her family relocated to the United States in May 2007. Interestingly, she did not consider herself solely Congolese nor Zambian. Belinda informed me that even though people would expect her to regard herself as Congolese because of her father, she claimed she found it difficult to do that because she left Congo when she was very young and had no ties to her father's homeland. In fact, she said she knew nothing about Congo but was mainly familiar with Zambia, where she was raised until she

[5] This is another assertion that reinforced my belief that she might not have been open about her immigrant status. I believe that at 18 years old, she should have an idea of why they relocated from her country of birth.

was 17, before her family relocated to the U.S. Ironically, Belinda does not consider herself Zambian either, despite having been raised there and having closer ties with her Zambian relatives. Belinda's identities are very situational and always shifting. When asked what she considers herself, she responded "it depends with the situation." She could be Zambian, Congolese or even American, she added. Belinda claimed that they lived a comfortable life back in Zambia even though her father relocated the family to the United States in search of "greener pastures." Education was important to her father, she said. Even though schools in Zambia are relatively good, her father believed that American education is superior. According to Belinda, this was a big factor in their decision to relocate to the U.S.

Academically, Belinda considered herself an average student. She averaged A's and B's in Social Studies, her favorite subject. In other subjects she did not "do as well." The Social Studies teacher was her favorite teacher because she was "nice" to her and provided her with the academic help she needed. Mathematics and Science were not her favorite subjects and was not performing well in them. She thought these are difficult subjects. In the semester that she participated in this study, Belinda was struggling in Math and predicted a failing grade. Her preference for Social Studies was linked to her future career goals. She was planning on a career in international marketing or banking. When asked why banking, she admitted she admired people who work in the bank. Belinda was however cognizant of the fact that her poor performance in Math might inhibit her from pursuing a career in banking or marketing, which was why, she had "plan B." Her alternative plan career-wise is to work in the legal system. She wanted to study criminal justice and forensics. She stated that she was fascinated with criminal cases and was interested to find out why people commit atrocious crimes such as murders and assault.

At the time of the study, Belinda said she was progressing well in school and was looking forward to graduating. This was not the case when she first started school in the U.S. According to Belinda, she should have completed high school by now, if the school had placed her in the right grade when she first arrived. Rather than placing her in 11th grade, she was forced to redo 10th grade, which she had already completed before she left her native country. Clearly, Belinda was upset about this, and she complained bitterly about it. She did not understand why, despite coming from an English speaking country, she was placed two grades below where she should have been. In this sense, she believed that her proficiency in English should have earned her a ticket to the right grade. Belinda understood the value of speaking English as a new immigrant in her school. According to Belinda, the reason she was not friends with other African girls was because most of them were in the ESL classes while she attended regular classes. For Belinda, this could mean that speaking English counts for something. In her opinion, having to repeat a class was a waste of time because she had to "repeat things she has already learnt." Her father tried to intervene several times on her behalf with no success. When asked why she was held back, she responded that the school informed her that she did not have enough credits to proceed to 11th grade. She complained emphatically, calling this an unfair expectation, "because schools in Zambia do not use the credit system as American schools." This was a big disappointment to her, but she reported that she had moved on and was looking forward to graduating at the end of the school year.

Belinda was not engaged in any extra-curricular activities either. Here again, gender was a constricting factor in her schooling. Part of the reason why she could involve herself in sports was because of her views on sports attire, which she considered "very revealing." However, her lack of involvement in extra-curricular activities at school did not mean she had no hobbies.

Belinda liked to watch Japanese cartoons and soccer. At the time of the interview, the World Cup tournament had just begun. Her favorite team was, of course, Zambia (even though they did not make it to the tournament) but she "loves Barcelona of Spain," which was at time was the favorite to win the championship.

Despite her negative views about her schoolmates, Belinda loved her school. One of the best attributes of Diversity High according to Belinda was the school's diversity. Even though she did not interact with them much, she enjoyed her school because there were students "from many different parts of the world." According to Belinda, people in her school were interested in her background. Surprisingly, she seemed to enjoy rather than get annoyed when people continuously inquired about her background. It is ironic that she enjoys this type of attention from her peers and yet she saw no need for friendships. In order to understand the dynamics in the girls' classrooms, I had asked respondents to provide me with a visual representation of how students sat in their favorite class. Of the four participants, Belinda was the only one who could not do this. She explained that she could not remember how students were located in the class because she sat in front of the class and never took time to look behind her. It was not clear, however, whether this was as a result of disinterest in her peers or because she was paying attention to the teacher and did not want to be distracted.

Belinda believed that in the U.S., students "have it too easy." In this regard, she preferred school in Zambia, which she viewed as more competitive. According to Belinda, "students back home in Zambia are more motivated and driven to study and search new information themselves." She thought that in the U.S., students get by in school with minimum effort. She claims this was why she was motivated. According to Belinda, the system back home where students were ranked based on their academic capability was much better because it was more

competitive. In her view, there was more incentive to work hard because all students wanted to be ranked higher than the next student. However, not all was negative about American schooling. She liked that technology was used more in schools. In her native Zambia, technology was used minimally. She claimed that life as a student was more manageable because of technology. She often used a computer to complete her homework, and she checked her e-mail and grades online.

At the end of my fieldwork, there were many aspects of Belinda's life that I still was not clear about. This could be because out of the four girls, she was the only one I had not interacted with prior to the study. I also spent the least amount of time with her because she always had to rush home after our meetings. In fact, at times, I cut the interview short because she was needed at home. Furthermore, I did not meet any of her family members. I recognize that this affected my analysis of her. For instance, even though I had some assumptions, I am still not certain about her immigration status. In order to understand participants' backgrounds, I had asked them questions about immigrating to the U.S. When I asked Belinda why her family relocated to the U. S., she responded that they moved in search of "greener pastures." It is true that most immigrants come to the U.S. in search of better opportunities, yet I could not help but wonder about Belinda's status. Being a Congolese, and having moved to Zambia and finally to the U.S., it is possible that Belinda's family relocated to the U.S as refugees. But while my focus in this study was not about the girls' immigration status, knowledge of the girls' immigration status might help explain why they experienced schooling the way they did.

In the recent past, there has been an influx of Congolese refugees into the city that Belinda lived. Despite her not mentioning this, I have strong suspicions that Belinda could also be a refugee. This assumption is even more plausible considering that her family moved to

Zambia at the peak of the Congolese civil war. Since the war began, there has also been an influx of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, (DRC)[6] to Zambia, one of her bordering nations. Still, given my limited relationship with her, I could not insist she divulge this information if she was not willing. Furthermore, given the negative connotation and stigma attached to refugee status, she might have felt uneasy sharing this kind of information with a stranger.

Her views on friendship and belonging were another indication of how different she was from her peers. I am not certain if Belinda was rejecting her peers because she could not make friends or if this was out of choice. Belinda considered herself different from her peers and was not worried about being seen as such. She dressed differently, had an accent, and basically did not follow or believe in the any of the contemporary norms for youth. She shunned popular culture, did not watch TV except news, cartoons and soccer. Because dressing is an important marker for social acceptance in young people's lives, I wondered if she was being rejected because she was "not cool" like the rest of the young ladies in her school, whom I observed wearing "hip" clothes, or if her religious beliefs might have been alienating her from her peers, or if she deliberately alienated herself from her peers as she claimed.

I also believe that meeting her parents would have provided deeper insight into Belinda's life. Given that her deep Christian convictions emanated from her upbringing, I wonder how

[6] I strongly suspect that Belinda's family could have fled from the civil war in the DRC. There are many explanations as to why refugee students choose not identify with this status. For one, there is the social stigma associated with discrimination that is attached with the label refugee. Most importantly, however, is the trauma refugees suffer as a result of the atrocities committed against them in their native countries. Once they arrive in the new country of resettlement, they would rather forget those painful memories. All these are possible explanations as to why Belinda might have been reluctant to divulge her real status to me. However, there is also the possibility that she truly does not know why they moved from Congo. It could be that her parents never informed her of the real reasons for moving to Zambia.

much this shaped how she viewed and interacted with her family. She had stated that she preferred spending time with her family, rather than with her peers at school, with whom she had no common interest. Regardless of how she felt about her family, her accounts suggest a strict and restrictive family background. Of course, this is not to say one cannot have a strict and loving family. Observing the family interact with one another would have helped me better understand her upbringing. It would have been enlightening to see how she behaved when her family, particularly her father, whom she referred to as the "head of the house," was around her. Observing family interactions would have been helpful in further discerning Belinda's character.

Dhahabu: Oblivious but optimistic

When I first met Dhahabu she was a cheerful 17-year-old 11th grader. She was from Burundi but was born in Tanzania. She was of medium build, and slightly short in height. She was light-skinned and had thick, dark hair which she usually wore in corn rows and other times covered with a headscarf. Dhahabu came from a family of seven, three boys and two girls. She had two older sisters who attend local community colleges. She had a younger brother, who attended a local elementary school. Dhahabu also had an older brother who could not relocate with the rest of the family because at the time the family moved, he was older than 18. According to United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) stipulations, only children below the age of 18 are allowed to accompany their parents to the third country of resettlement. According to Dhahabu, her brother was married and has his own family. This further complicated his chances of ever joining the rest of the family in America. Dhahabu lamented that she missed her brother but added that she was powerless to help him.

Dhahabu was very personable; she was polite and friendly. She had a quiet demeanor and said thank you all the time – which I found quite amusing at times. When I called her to set

up an interview time, she would say thank you; when I dropped her off at home after the interview she said thank you and when I thanked her at the end of the interview session, she said thank you. Despite numerous struggles she faced in her day-to-day life, Dhahabu was still optimistic and positive about her future. For instance, during the period in which she participated in this study, she was struggling to keep up her grades at school. In fact, her teachers frequently warned her that she was at risk of failing because of her low grades. Yet, rather than give up and submit to fate, as some students do if they find themselves in such bleak situations, she forged ahead as if this was not a concern. She happily talked about her plans for her future and of going to college to study banking. If her career as a banker did not materialize, she wanted to be a nurse.

It might seem like nonchalance towards her gloomy situation, but that was not the case. Dhahabu was extremely concerned. She just did not let "these concerns" deter her future plans or even affect her immediate schooling. Even though she was struggling in school, Dhahabu's student identity was clearly important to her. This became apparent when we did the Diversity Toss activity and I asked her to choose the five identities that she believed most define her. Her student identity was number three on the list. Dhahabu viewed school as the key that will open doors to her future—a future which included going back home to Africa to help the family she left behind.

In addition to her optimism about her future, Dhahabu also demonstrated a positive attitude on other challenging occasions. For instance, a few weeks into the study, she found out that she would graduate after all. After months of agonizing about this and not knowing for sure if a high school diploma would become a reality, she finally received the good news that she could graduate with the rest of her cohort. Despite the possibility that she would fail, she

continued to study. Graduation was a big milestone for Dhahabu because she was the first in her family to graduate from high school. Two years before, her older sister dropped out of school in 11th grade because she was failing all her classes. Last year her brother followed suit by dropping out at the end of 11th grade. For a while, it seemed as if Dhahabu was destined to follow in her siblings' footsteps, but she beat the odds and graduated from high school.

Having interacted with Dhahabu and her family on numerous occasions, it was natural that I consider her as a participant in the study. In my view, she exemplified many aspects of immigrant girls in American schools – both positive and negative. Dhahabu's parents were from Burundi but she was born in Nduta, a refugee camp in northwestern Tanzania. Her family moved to Tanzania as a result of a civil war between the Hutus and Tutsis that forced thousands of Burundians to flee their homes first in the 1970s then later again in the 1990's. When asked about her nationality, she claimed neither Burundian nor Tanzanian identities. While she acknowledged her dual nationality (Burundian/Tanzanian), Dhahabu preferred to identify herself as an African. In her view, strangers could rarely tell whether she is Tanzanian or Burundian, but often time they could figure out that she was African. "Maybe it is because of my accent, or the way I dress," she explained

I had known Dhahabu for four years. Lately, I began noticing some changes in her. She interacted with her peers more, and even though she still could not communicate in English fluently, she seemed to understand the language better than when she first began school. The biggest change, however, was evident in her dressing style. When I first met Dhahabu, she always covered her hair with a headscarf and never wore pants. Instead, her school wore consisted of long skirts and dresses extending to her ankles. Now the headscarf was gone and so

were the long dresses and skirts. In fact it was typical to see Dhahabu in the fitting, fashionable jeans that are in mode with young women nowadays.

The year of my study was Dhahabu's fourth year in the United States. My first encounter with Dhahabu occurred when I volunteered as a tutor to English as Second Language (ESL) students at Diversity High School. She had only been in the U.S. for a couple of months and could not communicate in English at all when she first arrived in the U.S. As a Swahili speaker, I had responded to a call by the local school district to work with Swahili-speaking English Language Learners at the school. There were about 20 Burundian refugee students that needed help in that English as a Second Language class. Like her peers, she could not communicate in English. All she did back then was smile and nod her head whenever she was spoken to. Dhahabu stood out from her peers. She seemed shy, but not withdrawn. At the time, I wondered if she would ever make it in this country. Like her Burundian peers, their academic struggles were immense. They could barely read, write or speak English. Yet expectations in the class were not different for them. Like mainstream students, they were expected to complete their assignments and sit for exams. It was no wonder that Dhahabu was failing all her classes. Back then, I had assumed her academic struggles were mainly a result of low English skills and lack of familiarity with the American education system.

I was surprised to find out that when she came to the U.S., Dhahabu had been elevated five grade levels higher from her previous grade back in Tanzania. Before moving to the U.S., Dhahabu was in grade four, where she mainly learned in Kirundi and Swahili. In the U.S., she was placed in 9th grade, where instruction was fully in English. Upon inquiring why she was placed in 9th instead of 4th grade, she was informed that her age required her to be in 9th grade. Her parents tried to intervene and begged the school to place her in a lower grade level because

of her limited academic and language skills, but to no avail. Regardless, I doubt her parents' attempt at intervening would have changed anything. Neither her mother nor father could speak or write in English. Their inability to communicate in English hampered their chances to advocate for their daughter. I was aware of her parents' struggles in this regard, as they had asked me to explain various documents, such as letters from school and bank documents. On numerous occasions, they asked me to explain consent forms for their children to participate in various studies at the request of the teachers. They also asked for my help to fill transfer forms for their children to move from one school to another.

Dhahabu was not happy with the school's decision to place her in grade 9 rather than 4. She understood it would be difficult to catch up with the rest of the class given her educational background at the refugee camp. At the time, she was 13-years-old and claimed she did not have a problem being in a class with ten year olds. "They were just three years older than me!" she exclaimed. She did not blame her teachers or the school for this decision. In her view they were just doing their job. Dhahabu has come a long way since I first met her at the ESL class. I have witnessed Dhahabu and other Burundian students' gradual growth and gain in self-confidence. Although Dhahabu had improved tremendously in many aspects, she still struggled to communicate and could not hold sustained conversations in English.

Dhahabu was in 12th grade and looking forward to finishing high school so that she could get a "good job" to help her family financially. For Dhahabu, her student identity was important to her and informed her future plans. She believed that once she finished school and got a job, she could assist her family in the United States and back home in Tanzania. Dhahabu loved school. I could see it in her eyes and in the way she talked about school. Furthermore, Dhahabu had only positive things to say about her experiences at Diversity High despite the

numerous struggles she faced as she tried to adjust. In addition to her academic struggles, she was also a victim of bullying and harassment from her peers. She was picked on and called names. On numerous occasions she was bullied because of her ethnic roots. According to Dhahabu, there were times she was told to "go back to Africa." Dhahabu complained that most of her bullies were American. They laughed and made fun of her for her poor English skills. From her accounts, she was not the only target of bullying. Dhahabu disclosed that her American colleagues complained that African students smell and dress "uncool." However, she "never let this get to her," she explained. Bullying and other negative experiences had further hampered her ability to make friends with American students, and as result, Dhahabu felt more comfortable with other Africans, particularly her Burundian peers. Consequently, her social network was limited.

Dhahabu's lack of social networks had and will continue to have dire repercussions for her future. Other than her ESL teacher, she did not have any other kind of mentoring or relationships with teachers or her peers that provided opportunities for developing social and cultural capital. For instance, she did not engage in any sporting activity or volunteer work after school. Evidently, as an 11th grader Dhahabu did not understand the importance these experiences have when applying for college. She wanted to go to college to be a nurse. Volunteering at a hospital or a nursing home would go a long way to increase her chances of being accepted at the very competitive nursing schools, but Dhahabu was neither aware of nor did she understand this connection. I believe this might have been a result of Dhahabu's lack of understanding of how the school system works.

It is as surprising that Dhahabu could not clearly articulate school policies, yet they had a direct bearing on her life. She did not understand the gravity of some of these policies and the

implications they might have in her academic life with implications for the rest of her life. There are possible explanations for this. For one, given Dhahabu's account, it appears that the school had not clearly explained these polices to Dhahabu and her parents. Secondly, this could be a result of language barriers that inhibited her from understanding school policies and procedures.

Graduation was an example of such a policy. According to Dhahabu, students who were over 18 have to drop out of school because the age limit for high school was 18 years. From Dhahabu's example, I realized that Dhahabu was not a unique case; rather it could be a problem with many refugee students who have not experienced formal schooling. To this end, Dhahabu informed me that her teacher constantly reminded her to work hard in Geometry class so as not to fail the class. According to Dhahabu, if she failed the class, this would mean repeating it the following year and given that she was already 18, she would be 19 years old in 12th grade. Consequently, she would have to drop out of school. When I asked Dhahabu if she was aware of anyone who had been affected by this particular policy, she pointed to her older sister and brother, both of whom had suffered a similar fate. When I further inquired if she knew of any other person, she mentioned two of her Burundian peers. Still, these bleak schooling prospects did not seem to dampen her optimism about school or the future.

The point I want to emphasize about Dhahabu is her positive attitude and faith in school. Evidently, Dhahabu faced enormous struggles at school. She was at one point in danger of dropping out of school, and she suffered alienation from mainstream school life because of her limited English. She was also a victim of bullying from her peers. Despite these adversities, Dhahabu did not speak negatively about her peers, her teachers or the school in general. Her optimism was especially evident when speaking about her plans for the future. Dhahabu did not

regard herself as a failure. Even when there were indications she might not graduate from college, Dhahabu still had plans for the future which included education and a career.

Angela: "Being African helps me to be smart"

Angela was a 16-year-old junior when we met. Her family relocated from Kenya to the United States four years ago. At the time of the study, she lived with her mother, an older sister who was a year older, and two younger sisters who were in 7th and 9th grades. Angela was a high achiever who was driven by success and good grades. Angela's father passed away when she was very young, and, for a long time, her mother raised her children as a single parent. Angela was partly driven academically because she wanted to emulate her mother, who was a graduate student at the local university, and whom she considered her role model. She was very close to her mother and her three sisters. Angela informed me that as a single parent, her mother worked hard to ensure that she provided the best life for her four daughters.

Growing up, she was very close to her father and even though she was very young when he passed away, she still had fond memories of him. At the time of the study, her academic abilities could be explained in part by her schooling back home in Kenya. Angela and her sisters attended an elite boarding school in Kenya until they left to come to the U.S. Angela had no complaints about life in Kenya even though she believed school was much easier here in the U.S. She had a fulfilling childhood despite being raised by a single mother. She claimed that even though she was not a high achiever in Kenya, she still performed well in school. She had supportive relatives and friends, many of whom she had stayed in touch with four years after leaving Kenya.

As a junior, Angela was still not sure of her future career goals even though she foresaw herself involved in a Math or Science field. She predicted a career in engineering or pharmacy.

Angela was an excellent student and she was particularly good in Math. Math and French were her fortes. Seemingly, she was very confident of her academic capabilities and rightfully so. Angela's current GPA is 3.9, and she was aiming for an even higher GPA. While she had no set future career plans, she was very sure about her education plans – at least the ones she had control over. As an 11th grader, Angela had less than two years before she enters college and had already started planning for it. Angela was aiming for a "good" school, and was hoping for a school like the state university that her mother attended. Even though she had been in the U.S for only four years at the time of the study, she understood the intricacies of the American education system. She knew that to be admitted to a big university like the one her mother was attending meant working hard in school. She knew she had to have a high GPA, which she was fervently working at. Not only that, she also understood that to be competitive she had to take more advanced placement (AP) classes, which she was already doing. In addition, she understood that unlike back home where academic achievement was the sole determiner of college entrance, in the U.S. there are additional factors needed for college entrance. That was why she was involved in numerous extra-curricular activities – to improve her chances of admission to a "good" college. She was active in sports even though she admitted she was not very athletic; she was a member of numerous clubs in school and in her church, and had even set some time out of her already packed schedule to volunteer as a Sunday school teacher at a local church, which was different from the church she attended with her family.

Angela's confidence in her academic abilities emanated from several sources. Her teachers and mother helped shape her student identity. Her teachers thought highly of her as a student and so did her mother. Whenever I would inquire from her mother about her well-being, she always responded with pride at how well Angela was doing in school. In fact, she went as

far as relaying to me that of her four daughters, she was least worried about Angela with regard to school. Unlike her two sisters, Angela's mother rarely had to remind her to do her schoolwork. Angela did not get in trouble at school and, most importantly, she was very consistent in her grades. I can also attest to Angela's work ethic when it came to school. Whenever I would visit the family, she would always be at her table studying.

Angela was an active teenager. She had a busy life in and out of school. Even though she was not talented in athletics, she tried all kinds of sports. Angela took part in track, soccer and volleyball, all of which she attempted for one semester and gave up because she could not make the team. Angela confessed that she was not good at sports but needed it "because it helps when applying for college." She complained that practice took a lot of her time away from books. Even though this did not affect her grades, she decided the effort she put into sports was not worth the time she was spending away from studying. Angela seemed very strategic in the choices she made in school. After a couple of semesters trying out different kinds of sports, she gave that up and tried a more manageable extra-curricular activity. She joined the African Students Association (ASA), which she claimed did not take as much time or energy and allowed her more time for her studies. She admitted that in addition to improving her chances to enter a good university, she claimed that she joined ASA to meet and interact with other African students at her school. Through joining the club, she met other African students in her school who she never thought were Africans. Angela was very active in the club, and despite being a junior, she was nominated by the teachers to be the president of the club. As the president, Angela did a lot to revamp the club, which she claimed was almost dead before she took charge. Angela was not only a member of ASA but was also a member of the Black Students' Union.

She was also actively involved in other clubs in school, including the French club and the National Honor Society.

Angela was not only active in school; she was similarly involved in numerous activities outside of school. As a devoted Seventh Day Adventist, she rarely missed church on Saturdays. She sang in her church choir and was also an active member of the youth group at the same church. Both of these activities required a huge time investment. Over the summers, her church involvement even required her to travel out of the state for youth conferences. In addition to these, each Sunday Angela also volunteered as a Sunday school teacher at a church near her home.

Angela was a typical teenager. She dressed similarly to many of her peers in school (usually in jeans, a t-shirt or tank top and a sweatshirt). She also had many friends with whom she spent a lot of time. She liked to hang out at the mall with her friends and watch movies when she had time. Swimming, she informed me, was one of her favorite pastimes in summer.

Academic success did not shield Angela from experiencing some of the issues immigrant students go through. Angela claimed that when she first came to the U.S., life was difficult because of language. Even though she spoke English very well, she complained that her accent was a big problem. Angela claimed that in her first two years in the U.S., life in school was not easy. Making friends was difficult because of her accent. That was back then. Now in her fourth year in the U.S., one could barely notice her foreign accent. In fact, Angela informed me that on several occasions, she had been mistaken for an African-American because of her "American" accent. Angela claimed that since she got rid of her accent, she enjoyed school now more than ever. Her circle of friends was diverse. Her circle of friends included Americans, Africans and

Asians. However, her two best friends were two African girls, one from Tunisia and the other from Zimbabwe.

Angela is Gusii, a small ethnic community in Kenya. She claimed her ethnic identity did not mean anything to her. She understood the maternal language but did not like to speak it. When spoken to in their vernacular language, she and her two sisters responded in English. Even though Angela missed and had fond memories of her native Kenya, she did not think she would ever go back home to stay. She wanted to make the U.S. her home. In her view there were many advantages to becoming an American as a student. Angela was especially referring to opportunities such as financial aid that is uniquely accessible to American college students. As a successful immigrant student, Angela was worried about her future after high school and was aware of the realities she would have to confront regarding college. She understood that she could not afford tuition to "top-notch" schools that she wanted to attend. Angela had witnessed her friends from Africa, students who were equally successful in high school but had to give up their dreams of attending very selective colleges because they could not afford the exorbitant tuition charged for international students. Angela shared with me the plight of a close friend of hers who was successful at her high school. This friend, she claimed, was accepted in several competitive schools, but his parents could not afford tuition fees. In the end, he enrolled at a local community college in anticipation of transferring to the local state university. That is why Angela expressed that given a choice to become American, she would give up her Kenyan citizenship and become American.

Angela's identity was situational. She constructed her identity based on a foreseen and imagined future. Angela was aware that non-Americans' tuition fees are three times what American students pay for tuition. She was also aware of the numerous financial resources

available for American college students. She lamented this and wished she was American to have access to the numerous resources available for Americans at the college level.

As an 11th grader, Angela was still not very sure of her future career goals. She foresaw a career in Math and Science because she was good in both subjects. Angela was especially successful in Math and had accrued an overall grade of A in all her Math classes. Angela was hoping for a career in a field that was lucrative and sustainable. Just like in other aspects of schooling, she was thoughtful about her job prospects in the future. Angela explained that because of the current global economic state, she hoped she could get into a field not prone to economic fluctuation. Angela was very aware of the current economic situation, and this informed her perspective regarding future career goals. She experienced the effects and frustrations of looking for work without success. Over the summer, she tried looking for a job so that she could help her mother financially, but she was not successful. In the end, she worked as a babysitter for one of her mother's friends for a couple of weeks and managed to save a little cash for herself. Such experiences informed her views about the economy and future job prospects. She "can tell the situation is bad" because she was "just like millions of other people out there looking for jobs with no success."

Zura: My friends call me the "African queen"

Zura was a 19-year-old from Sudan. She was tall, slim, and dark in complexion. Zura had a personable demeanor. She was articulate but had a light stammer. She was the second child in a family of three children. She had an older brother who is away at college and a younger brother. Her father was a factory worker while her mother was an office administrator. Another distinct characteristic feature that distinguished Zura was that she was easy to talk to. She also liked to laugh a lot. I am not sure why she did this, but before she responded to a question, she

would first laugh. Maybe she was just nervous. While not shy, I noticed that many times during the interviews she would avoid looking me straight in the eye. For example, she could not face me directly when explaining her lackluster performance when she was in 10th grade. She also avoided my gaze during our discussion about boys and dating. In one of the interviews, when I asked her if she was dating anyone, she said no, but later on I found out that she might not have been forthright about this. While I never got a confirmation from her, there were indications that she might indeed have had a boyfriend.

According to Zura, she had lived in the U.S. for "a long time." They moved to the U.S ten years ago because of the Sudanese civil war. She indicated that she did not have much recollection of her life back home in Sudan. Being 19 years old, Zura was older than most of the students in her class, many of whom were 18 or younger. She explained that when she first came to the United States, she did not speak any English and her teachers placed her a grade lower than the third grade which she was back home in Sudan.

Academically, she considered herself an average student. She performed average in all subjects but did particularly well in her favorite subject, Math. She realized however, that she could do much better in school if she put more effort in her schoolwork. She admitted she "can be lazy at times" and did the minimum "just to get by" in school. As a senior, Zura was looking forward to graduation and going to college. She wanted to study psychology. However, she was realistic about her college prospects, given her family's financial situation. Her plan was to attend the local state college in her home town, but she understood that this might not be possible given her family's financial situation and her low grades.

According to Zura, her friends called her the "African queen." When I asked her why, she looked down and replied shyly, "I don't know why." Zura clearly stood out physically. Like

most Sudanese, she was tall, dark and slim. Judging from her complexion I could instantly figure out her Sudanese heritage by just looking at her. Sudanese people have distinct features that are easily distinguishable. Most Southern Sudanese have similar physical features like Zura. Seemingly, Zura put in a lot of effort into her looks. Each time we met, Zura was always adorned with a different hairstyle. Zura, like her peer Angela, dressed like a typical youth. Slim-fitting jeans, trendy t-shirts and tops were her normal go-to-school attire.

In my view, gender issues were most apparent in her family dynamics. For instance, Zura seemed very upset at her father about dating and socializing with friends. "My dad makes me very mad" said Zura. "I just don't understand why he doesn't trust me," she added in a frustrated tone. Dating had been a source of conflict in her house. She was frustrated and believed her father treated her differently compared to her brother, "who pretty much does what he wants." Zura was popular and had many friends, but she did not socialize much with them outside of school. She complained that she had to ask for permission before she went out with friends. Even then, she was only allowed to go out with girl friends and not boys, and she had to be home before 6pm. This was a bone of contention in the family. Zura was very upset with her father about this expectation and called it "unfair." She did not understand why her brother could go out and stay as late as he wanted as soon as he turned 18. "He treats me like a baby!" she said exasperatedly.

Zura had other complaints about her father's "unfairness." She claimed that her brother was also allowed to attend college away from home, yet her father was reluctant to do the same for her. According to Zura, her father maintained that the rules would only change once she got married and moved out of the family house. Going out was not the only source of conflict between Zura and her father. Zura's father was a firm believer in traditional gender roles – he

believed that household chores were women's responsibilities. He considered household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry as women's work. Interestingly, despite his views about gender, education was a priority for Zura's father. According to Zura, on school days, she had to complete her school work before she did any household chores.

When I first met Zura three years ago, her family lived a few miles from the downtown area – in an area generally considered low-income. Their house was located close to the area's high school, yet her parents chose to enroll her and her siblings in a neighboring school district, which is home to a state university. According to Zura, her high school was one of the best in the city. This is also another indication of the importance her father placed on education. By the time of the first interviews, Zura's family had moved from their old house and was living in a more upscale neighborhood close to the school she was attending. This area is considered middle and upper class. As I drove to her house that day for the first interview, I could not help but wonder what had changed in their lives. In the interview, she revealed that her parents still worked in the same jobs they worked when I first met her. If anything, her father had lost his part-time job. I wondered if this was the reason why Zura was so adamant about getting a job. She wanted to help alleviate the financial stress her family was going through. At a later interview, Zura informed me that she needed a job to relieve her parents of their financial burden. She started searching for a job before the school year ended but was not very successful. She finally found a job at a local eatery at a nearby mall.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described participants' lives partly using their own words. My focus in this chapter has been to present these girls as dynamic human beings who lived complex lives. They are female students; they had different forms of relationships with their families,

peers and teachers. They had plans for the future, including education and work. Some of these were attainable and some were not. Their identities played a significant role in the plans they made for the future. I also described their migration histories, why and how they relocated to the U.S. In the next chapter, I discuss how participants constructed their achievement identities.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCEPTUALIZING SMARTNESS: CONSTRUCTING ACHIEVEMENT-ORIENTED IDENTITIES

One Sunday evening, a couple of months after I completed my fieldwork I got a phone call from Dhahabu. I was pleasantly surprised to hear from her and told her so. "Betty!" she exclaimed excitedly in Swahili, "I have been trying to call you since yesterday." I apologized and explained to her that I did not recognize her new number and that I was glad to hear from her. She went on to explain that she had good news to share with me. Now, she had my full attention. "What is it?" I asked, now equally excited. Since I had completed the study, I rarely spoke to the girls but checked in on them through their parents to inquire about their well-being and progress in school. Admittedly, I had been more in contact with Dhahabu than the other three girls. It is not that I cared for Dhahabu's well-being more than the other three girls; I was very concerned about her progress in school. At the time, there were indications that she might not graduate from high school. Naturally, I was worried about this. In consecutive years, her older brother and sister had dropped out of high school. I was informed that they both had failed all their 11th grade classes. Being in 11th grade and failing almost all of her subjects, Dhahabu seemed destined to follow her siblings' path. Her teachers had warned her several times in the course of the semester that her Geometry class was going to be the determining factor whether she stayed in school or not. At the time of the interview, she had a failing grade in the class and had almost accepted the inevitable, that she would not make it to 12th grade. The prospects of graduating were even bleaker. Over the next couple of months, after I completed my fieldwork, I would call her regularly to inquire about her progress.

By that Sunday evening, I had not spoken to Dhahabu for almost a month and a half. I could tell she had something important to share with me. "I was calling to see if you could come help me fill my graduation form," she said happily. I was elated and very proud of her. Dhahabu was not going to end up without a high school diploma like her siblings had. I congratulated her and promised to pass by her house in the course of the week to help her fill the form.

This is a simple story that might not mean much if I left it at this point. I was compelled to share Dhahabu's story because of her resilience and the fact that she had beaten the odds when most people around her had lost hope in her ability to graduate from high school. I must admit, I was one of the naysayers. Each time I visited her or checked in to inquire about her situation, it would be the same story. "I am not sure Betty." "Even the teachers still don't know," was her response to my questions about graduation.

I finally got an opportunity to pass by her house to assist her with the form. When I saw the form, I was surprised, because it did not require much from her. All she needed to complete were personal information such year of birth, all her names, and age. . In addition, she was required to commit to a graduation gown and these had different price ranges, so she had to choose one. The form also required her to state whether she wanted graduation pictures taken. It looked like a simple form and yet Dhahabu had trouble filling it.

I begin this chapter with Dhahabu's story to illuminate the irony of her situation. On the one hand, I was happy and even proud that she beat the odds and was going to graduate from

high school when that seemed uncertain. On the other hand, she was going to graduate from high school but could not fill a simple graduation form. As l left her house that evening, I could not help but ponder over Dhahabu's future. Dhahabu is more optimistic about her future than ever before now that she is certain about graduation. She has plans to go to college and wants to be a banker. Yet, I couldn't help but wonder how realistic these plans were.

How do minority students like those with immigrant status construct "achievement-oriented identities?"[7] How do they conceptualize themselves as academic beings? Oysterman, Gant and Ager (1995) contend that minority students learn strategies to attain achievement identities. According to O'Connor (2001), one major challenge in educational research is the lack of deeper understanding of the relationship between how students view themselves and their academic outcomes. Given that identity construction is a dynamic process that is context-dependent, what are the strategies students, particularly minority students, employ in constructing their identities? How do these identities influence their perceptions of the opportunity structure in school? How do these perceptions shape their academic outcomes? I address the above concerns though the analysis of Angela, Belinda, Dhahabu and Zura. Specifically, I explore identity issues in relation to academic achievement.

My goal here is two-fold. The first goal is to elucidate how participants conceptualized achievement and the second is to illuminate the strategies the four girls used to construct their achievement identities. In order to understand how these girls thought of achievement, I focus on the young women's expectation of schooling and the processes that lead to the fulfillment of these expectations. In doing this, my goal is to discern the different types of relationships

[7] Lee (2003) defines achievement-oriented identities as those identities that will lead to academic success. In her study of ethnic minority students in Yunnan Province, China, Lee found that the students who do well in school are those who constructed achievement-oriented identities.

participants had, not just with their peers but also with institutional agents such as teachers, and ultimately how these relationships might have shaped their educational outcomes. My premise is that the identities students construct can lead to differential access to institutional resources necessary for success in school, resulting in differences in academic outcomes. In this chapter, I focus on the notion of academic achievement, a concept participants referred to as "smartness." "Smartness" in this sense is a relative term used by the girls to mean success in school. I rely on Stanton-Salazar's (2004) idea that adolescents develop relations with their teachers and peers which can generate forms of support leading to academic success. Stanton-Salazar further posits that the success of minority students is dependent not only on "students' level of engagement" but also "integration in the social and the intellectual fabric of the school" (p. 13).

I begin the chapter by discussing participants' conceptions of academic achievement. In delineating their accounts of achievement, I compare and contrast these with normative conceptions of achievement, specifically how achievement is defined in schools, by educators and society at-large. I address how their definitions parallel or differ from not just the conventional views of achievement but also those of each other. Next, I address the strategies these girls used to achieve academic success. Participants' narratives suggested that even though they shared views on what it means to be a successful student, they followed different channels to achieve this goal. I address how and if these girls understood what was expected of them academically and how they responded to these expectations. In addition, they shared some views on how students become "smart." Working hard, discipline, motivation, proficiency in English, good teachers, and prior schooling experiences were named as requisites for school success. In this section, I also address parents' role in helping minority students construct their achievement-oriented identities. Angela's mother, who was a graduate student, stood out in this respect.

Angela not only viewed her mother as a role model but also as her advocate in school-related matters. In the final section, I address the girls' understanding of the school's operational procedures. Understanding schooling processes was one indication that they understood what was expected of them. I specifically focus on how and if they utilized the resources and support system available at school and the implication this has on their attempt to succeed. I end the chapter by concluding that even though this group of girls shared a common heritage – African and immigrant, they still experienced school differently, leading to differences not only in how they conceptualized achievement but also in how they defined and constructed their achievement identities.

To address the above points, I draw on the perspectives of all girls but highlight two of the four participants. In my view, Angela and Dhahabu provide an interesting contrast in terms of achievement. Angela was a high achiever who was excelling in all her classes and understood the intricacies of schooling. In contrast, Dhahabu, who was failing most of her subjects, was once at risk of dropping out of school and lacked clarity on how the school system works. This does not mean that the other two participants' views do not matter in the argument I make here; rather, I use them to supplement the broader pattern that emerges from comparing Angela's and Dhahabu's accounts. Focusing on the two girls allows me to illuminate the nuances of schooling as experienced by these girls.

Synopsis of the girls' academic background

Participants' narratives revealed a variety of "cultural selves" or what Lee-Yok (2009) refer to as "subjectivities."[8] The four girls were good and obedient students; except for Belinda, they had both male and female friends from different parts of the world; some were athletes; they

[8] In distinguishing between identity and subjectivity, Lee-Yok, (2009) defines subjectivity as the situation of how human beings exist and how we live as human beings.

were staunch Christians; they complained about their parents and siblings; they had career ambitions, but above all they wanted to be successful in school even though their view of what success meant sometimes differed.

Table 2: Summary of the girls' academic background

Participant	**Angela**	**Zura**	**Belinda**	**Dhahabu**
Grade	11	12	12	12
GPA as reported by the girls	3.9	2.5	Does not know	Does not know
Duration of stay in the U.S (No. of years)	4	10	3	4
GPA that indicates "smartness" in their views	3.75	3.5	3.0	No numeric concept A and B
Favorite subject	Math	Math	Social Studies	Math
School	Dynamo High – close to a large research university	Dynamo High	Diversity High – close proximity to city's downtown area	Diversity High
Prior schooling in native country	Elite boarding school	Arabic speaking school	Urban school	Informal schooling at a refugee camp

Based on conventional measures of performance, I concluded that because of her 3.9 GPA, Angela was the most proficient academically of the four girls. Even with that, she was not satisfied and aimed for a 4.0 by the time she graduated. As an 11th grader, Angela was in no hurry to decide her future career though she alluded to "a job in the field of Science such as engineering or architecture." Her career choice fit her academic abilities. Angela performed excellently in Math and Science, which were also her favorite subjects. Unlike Angela, Zura was an "average" student who recognized that she could do better in her studies "if only she puts

more effort in her work." She was also good at Math and wanted to be a high school teacher. Her desire was to work with special needs children. Belinda from Diversity High also referred to herself as an "average" student even though in her last year before she graduated from high school, she had failed three of her subjects. Dhahabu was the least "successful" academically. She was in 12th grade and failed almost all her subjects in 11th grade.

Regardless of the variations, for the most part, all the girls held positive opinions about school. Similarly, even though they were not all "successful" students, they still wanted to do well in school and thus attempted to construct achievement-oriented selves. The strategies they used to accomplish this were contingent upon various factors, including family background, immigration history and the school environment. Zura and Dhahabu relocated to this country as refugees with little formal schooling and no English skills. Angela followed her mother who relocated to the U.S. to pursue her graduate studies. Belinda reported her father decided to move the family to the U.S. in search of "greener pastures." All four girls came from low- to middle-income backgrounds. Angela and Zura attended Dynamo High which is situated in close proximity to a research university that Angela's mother attended. Belinda and Dhahabu attended Diversity High, an ethnically and racially diverse high school situated close to the city's downtown area. All these factors had implications for how the girls experienced school and how they viewed themselves as academic beings.

Conceptions of academic achievement (smartness)

External and self-imposed measures in gauging "smartness"

As I explained earlier, achievement indicators used by schools include a number of cognitive and non-cognitive measures. Like other aspects of schooling, participants' views regarding achievement sometimes aligned with but also diverged from the conventional

definitions of achievement. While they acknowledged conventional measures of success in school, participants also imposed their own definitions of school success. For instance, they all mentioned GPA, completion of homework and class participation but also pointed to non-cognitive aspects of achievement such as level of engagement, discipline, effort, determination and resilience as important indicators of academic success. This view echoes the critics of the standards movement who maintain that evidence of success in school should not be restricted to indicators such as standardized scores and GPA. Opponents of these measures have called for less emphasis on high stakes accountability and grades and suggested that non-cognitive measures should also be considered when gauging student performance.

Of the four girls, Angela exemplified high achievement in school. In the semester that she participated in this study, Angela had earned a GPA of 3.75. She expressed then that she was aiming for a higher GPA in the subsequent semester, a goal which she fulfilled by attaining a 3.9 GPA. In Angela's view, attaining and maintaining a good GPA was important because of her future academic aspirations. Even though she was just an 11th grader, Angela could clearly articulate her future career and academic goals. She wanted to go to college once she graduated from high school and not just any college; she can "only settle for a big university." Angela was also well aware that a "good GPA is important for admission to a good university." According to Angela, a good GPA is 3.75 and above. It is not surprising then that when asked what "smartness" entails, she responded, "A smart person is a person who gets good grades." Achievement in Angela's view is not limited to cognitive skills, though. In a way, she imposes her own definition of smartness by adding, "A smart person is one who also uses common sense in life and does not get in trouble." When I asked her to clarify what she meant by "common sense," she replied:

> When you are told not to do something, you don't do it. Like if you are told something is going to have consequences and you go ahead and do it, then you are not smart. That means they don't use their common sense. Like if a student gets in trouble for obvious stuff. Like some people don't even take school seriously and they don't even care about school. Like those are stupid people. Like they just do whatever in school and they know they will get in trouble.

Angela viewed GPA as the basis of academic achievement but pointed to adherence to school rules and regulations as additional attributes of a successful student. In this sense, Rosen and colleagues (2010) posit that non-cognitive traits such as those mentioned by Angela can complement effort leading to better academic outcomes. Even though Angela was a successful student based on normative conceptions of achievement, she still questioned the validity of relying solely on grades as a measure of academic success and suggested that non-academic attributes should also be included as measures of achievement. Angela was not the only one who expressed this view. Belinda, Dhahabu and Zura made similar remarks. According to Angela, other indicators of success include exclusive and coveted membership to various organizations such as the National Honor Society (NHS), which students can only join if they have a high GPA, and admission to Advanced Placement (AP) classes, accomplishments that she has already and continues to achieve. In addition, Angela received a certificate of merit for her exemplary performance when she first attained the 3.75 GPA. Not surprising, one of the artifacts she chose to share with me was an academic letter that was given to her along with the Certificate of Achievement. She revealed that she hung her academic letter in her room next to her study table to remind her of her accomplishments.

Angela's peer from Dynamo High, Zura, expressed similar views regarding achievement. She agreed that GPA was an important gauge of academic performance, but when asked what she considered a good GPA, she assigned a lower numeric value of 3.5. Surprisingly, while she averaged an A in Math, her cumulative grade point average was only 2.5. She scored excellent

grades in Math but was performing dismally in other content areas, thus, lowering her GPA. When asked to explain the "inconsistency" in her grades she responded, "You can't be gifted equally in all subjects." Given her experiences, Zura believed that academic capabilities vary depending on the subject or class. "Some students are good in Math, others in Geography, while others are good in music or sports." Zura agreed with Angela that "smarts" is more than academics. While explaining the different cliques and social groups that existed in her school (a point I discuss in detail in Chapter Six), she complained about the "nerds," who despite their "smartness" have "poor people-skills." She explained:

> There are some people when you want to have a conversation with them they don't know much about the real world. They just want to talk about books the whole time and about homework. They usually don't want to speak to anybody, and when stuff come out of their mouth is not normal. They are book smart but always say weird stuff.

Zura summed up smartness as follows: "Smartness is when one does well in school or aces their tests, turn in their homework, have a good attitude in class and if they get a 3.5 and above that." Angela echoed the above point by saying, "I think there are like two types of smart. Like smart in life and smart in school." For these two girls, "smartness" not only entailed cognitive aspects but also subjective attributes including social relations. In other words, smart students not only perform well in school, but they also know how to relate to other people.

Comparably, Dhahabu appeared to be the least proficient academically. Interestingly, she did not view herself as a failure even though she was performing below average in most of her subjects. When I asked how she gauged herself in terms of achievement, she responded, "Sometimes I get C's and sometimes E's." Not only is Dhahabu performing below average (based on the normative standards of achievement), she was at one point at risk of failing and dropping out of school. At the time of the interview, Dhahabu was failing most of her classes and had been warned several times that she would not graduate if her grades did not improve.

When I asked her about her GPA, she had no idea because her "teacher had not informed" her. Interestingly, Belinda, Dhahabu's peer at Diversity High School, gave a similar response when I asked her about her GPA. While she did not place blame on the teacher as Dhahabu did, she also explained that she just had not checked her grades. Their responses were a bit surprising because at Diversity High grades are posted online and are password accessible to all students.

Initially, I was baffled at what seemed like these girls' nonchalance toward grades. It would be easy to conclude that these two girls did not care about their grades or that they were embarrassed to share their low grades with me, but the reality could be more complex than that. While not realistic, these girls had future education and career plans and could articulate them relatively well. The fact that they were failing a majority of their subjects had not inhibited them from having hopes for their future. They both wanted to go to college to pursue careers in the banking industry. In a way, they were realistic about this not becoming a possibility because they had alternative plans in case their primary goals did not materialize. Belinda's back-up career plan was Forensic Science while Dhahabu wanted to be a nurse. While their career choices implied that they did not view themselves as failures, it also speaks to their lack of clarity of college expectations. First, they were both failing in Math, a subject which is necessary in banking. Secondly, their second options did not align at all with their first career choices. Forensic Science and nursing need a different set of skills than banking. If anything, banking is a Math-oriented career while the other two are both Science-oriented. In any case, they were failing both subjects. Evidently, both girls lacked the cultural and social capital that would enable them to understand the relationship between schooling and the job market.

Interestingly, both understood the importance of achieving in school. When asked to describe a smart person, Belinda emphasized exams and grades. She stated, "A smart person

never fails her quizzes, gets good grades and understands most of the things the teacher says." She added that "smart" people do more than is expected of them. They "do extra work."

Similar to Angela and Zura, Dhahabu also enjoyed Math. Even though she was failing in the subject, she claimed that compared to other subjects, she earned better grades in Math. She explained that she likes Math because Math has a "universal language." She explained her point in the following way:

> I like Math because you do not have to know English to do well in Math. You just see what the teacher has written then you write. So if you can translate that into Kirundi or Swahili then you write it on paper then you can read it and do it. Math is all the same in French, English, Kirundi and Swahili. It can be understood because it is the same in all languages. But unlike English, Government, Economics because they write a lot so stuff it is difficult to translate all those words in Kirundi or Swahili.

In defining school success, Belinda also attached a lower GPA. In her view, a GPA of 3.0 represented high academic achievement because that is the "minimum cut off point" for college entrance. For Belinda, "smartness" was synonymous to being college-bound. Again, even though there was a chance that she might not make it to college because of her performance, Belinda still linked achievement with the possibility of attending college.

Interestingly, even though participants viewed smartness as having a high GPA, they all remarked that one cannot be smart in everything. In this respect, Dhahabu noted:

> I really believe in myself and work hard. I can be an A student but there are times when I get an E also. I do well in some subjects but some I don't do very well.

Belinda echoed this:

> For me it depends on the subject I am taking. Like there are some classes I am up there doing very well. I get very good grades and some I am just average. Like let's say, I am not a good person in Math and Science so I am like average but in Social Studies I am passing, I am getting A's and B's.

Zura similarly claimed:

> Like somebody can be good in Chemistry and someone else will be good in Geometry. I think everybody is smart in their own way. Everybody is good at something. They might not be smart in books but are smart in other ways. Like someone might not be good in school but they are good in art. They can draw but other people can't do that.

Angela agreed:

> I don't know sometimes you can take like a hard class and you get like a bad grade like you get a three point and that's hard class. So you can't be smart at everything.

All the participants described themselves as average students except Angela, who confidently stated, "I am an A student." Despite this, she still shared the above view by stating that "I consider myself an A student, I guess, I get pretty good grades. I am good in some subjects but there are some subjects that I am not good at but I will still try and work hard at them." In expressing the above sentiments, Angela admitted that even though she averaged A's in all subjects, she struggled in some classes. She added however, that she puts more effort in these than others in order to get good grades.

Participants' accounts of achievement suggest that they acknowledge and even strive to achieve based on normative standards of success. However, in some ways these girls are attempting to impose their own definitions of school success. Consequently, the girls who are struggling in school do not necessarily view themselves as failures.

Constructing an achievement identity: Strategies for becoming "smart"

Motivation and personal effort

In the previous section, I discussed how the girls understood and conceptualized success in school. For the most part they agreed that GPA is fundamental in determining academic achievement. "Smartness" was used by participants when referring to high academic achievement. Now, I will address how the girls understood the process that leads to being "smart." While they agreed on some aspects of how students become "smart," they also

disagreed on some. To understand how these girls thought of success in school, I asked questions such as, how do people become smart? How do you know someone is "smart?" "Studying," "motivation," "working hard" and "effort" were cited by the girls as requisites for "smartness." In their attempt to explicate the significance of non-cognitive skills in academic outcomes, Rosen and colleagues' (2010) review found motivation and high expectations as important attributes for educational success. In their review they reported attributes such as motivation, effort, self-regulated learning, and academic self-concept as prerequisites for academic achievement. They defined motivation as the students' desire to accomplish school related activities. Effort in the review is defined as the degree to which students take an active role in learning.

Accordingly, good grades were achievable for these girls with self-motivation and extra effort. Zura exemplified this by stating that her performance had improved since she became a senior. She did not blame anybody but herself for her failure in school. She admitted that up to 10th grade she had not been serious about school. She tried to explain her lackluster effort:

> I don't know it's just that in my high school year, like I'm a junior now and I don't know why. I have not been doing well. I just haven't been doing well. I have been lazy and stuff. Like in the last year I have noticed that I have been lazy. I have been trying to get my GPA up and stuff. It's like the end of my sophomore that's when I begun to get into school and stuff. Before, I don't know why I was not focusing on school. Sometimes I would come from school so tired I never put effort at all. If I knew there was a test, I would not put my all I would just come and look over my books quickly, and then I would be, like, I got it, then that would be pretty much it. But now I am studying, more and doing much better in school because I want to go to college.

Zura claimed she was on the right track at the time of the study and was working harder than before. The change in her attitude towards school was partly instigated by the fact that she was a senior and would be graduating soon. She planned to attend college and wanted to be a secondary school Math teacher. As a teacher, her plan was to also serve as a guidance counselor

because of her love for psychology. Given her low GPA, Zura was realistic about her future goals. She understood that her limited academic capabilities would stall her academic progression after high school. She was however optimistic about her long-term future. She revealed that she would first attend a local community college for two years then transfer to the local state university. Zura was not just referring to herself in this regard. She contended that regardless of one's abilities, one has to be motivated, to learn, and to put effort in one's work. She explained:

> Some people just don't care, so they don't put any effort in their work. I have seen some smart people who do badly in school because they just don't care. I see like they have potential in their future to do great but they just don't care.

Dhahabu reiterates Zura's view on how to succeed in school. She stated:

> You have to make sure that if you are given homework you do it and do it well. Also you have to study and when you do not understand something you have to ask the teachers to show you. You have to study at home to when you have time, at least take time to go over work you did in school that day.

Belinda on the other hand commented:

> I don't study that much at home, like taking a book start reading no. I only learn when the teacher is explaining, I write down notes. That is how I learn. I guess if you enjoy a subject like I enjoy Social Studies, you will do well. I feel like it is just natural to me and I am just good in that subject.

Based on her experiences, Belinda claims that even with minimal effort one can succeed, as long as they like and enjoy the subject.

Angela agreed with the two different arguments made by the three girls. While she acknowledged the role of individual effort and hard work in academic success, she also believed that some people are inherently "smart" and don't need to put in as much effort to succeed in school. For Angela, students can attain success through hard work, but she also believed that some are born naturally smart. She explained:

> I feel like sometimes some people are naturally smart but I am not, so I have to work hard. Like if I have a test, I will study for it or else I will fail. I am one of those people who have to work hard to get my grades so….like I am not just smart like that. Like in Math if I study it, I understand it better. So even if I think I am good in it, I have to study for it. There are people who are good in stuff even if they do not study for it. Like there is this girl she never studies for anything but she passes all her tests. Like some people just understand things easier, just in class. When the teacher is talking, it sticks in their heads or whatever. Like me, I have to still go back and review the material I learnt in class.

Angela knew this from personal experience. As she explained in the above excerpt, she worked hard to attain her high grades. Yet she was not unique in expressing this view. They shared the perspective that while some people have to put in a lot of effort to achieve, some are born naturally smart. Zura also commented:

> I think some people are smart from when they are born. Some people have good genes because their parents are like doctors and lawyers, so their child is going to become smart too.

Zura's point implies that children from well-to-do families have superior genetic make-up that allows them to excel in school. Even though they are not as popular as they were in the 1960's, the arguments about biological differences have been used to explain achievement disparities between different racial groups. While it is not clear where these views came from, Zura's comment echoed genetic and cultural deprivation arguments which have blamed poor and minority children's low achievement on their inferior genes.

These four girls had a complex view of how students become smart, one that recognized several operational views of "smartness." They agreed on the role individual effort plays in shaping academic success, but added that basic ability also comes into play in determining academic achievement. In this sense, they considered some students to be inherently smart. In the next section, I attempt to explain the factors that might have influenced their current achievement selves.

Prior schooling experiences in explaining achievement

Past schooling experiences appeared to influence present educational outcomes for the four participants. In this case, I refer to the girls' educational background before relocating to the U.S. As in other aspects of their lives, the quality of past educational experiences for these four girls was quite disparate. Angela, the highest achiever of the four girls, appeared to have had the most solid educational background. Even though her mother had raised her and her sisters as a single woman for over a decade, Angela's mother provided her children with a good education. Angela attended one of the best primary boarding schools in Kenya. Even after her mother left to come to the United States for further studies, her schooling was not interrupted in any way. Angela and her sisters were left under the guidance and care of trusted relatives, and they continued to attend the private boarding school. Angela proudly claimed that "there is not much difference in the quality of education" between the school she attended while she was still back home in Kenya and the ones she had attended here. Angela noted, however, that her academic performance while at home was not as good as it was at the time of the study. She attributed this to the difference in curriculum and the grading criteria between Kenya and the U.S. Angela believed that she was more successful in the United States as a student because learning was much simpler. She explained:

> I think school is much easier because you get better grades here and the system is kind of behind with some of the stuff we learn. Things are much tougher at home because there everything is based on tests but here it's based on homework. At home, even though you do your homework it's not going to count. I like that here homework is part of the grade, so you put more effort in your homework. And you can do better because you have time to do it away from school.

Angela's complaints were not about her school specifically but about the Kenyan education system in general. In addition to the grading system, Angela also questioned the purpose of corporal punishment, a rampant practice that has since been abolished in Kenyan

schools. She stated that rather than ensuring discipline, the practice instilled fear in students like her. She further asserted that she was always intimidated by the threat of punishment and as a result had "trouble concentrating on school work." When I asked why, she claimed she was "always worried about getting into trouble." She explained:

> It was so easy to get in trouble at home. I was always scared because I don't want to be spanked. Everyone who went to that school kind of you had to be spanked at some point. I don't think there is anyone who can say they have never been spanked. Here, you get in trouble, you don't get spanked. They take you to the office, which is better because I have never gone to the office for being in trouble.

Angela stated that in America, students have the freedom to express themselves in many ways unlike home, where students' freedom was curtailed greatly by school authority. Freedom of expression, she argued, has helped her to be "creative" and this has helped her succeed in school. In pointing out the differences in schooling in the United States and her country of origin, Angela further asserted that attending school in the U.S. has enabled her to thrive academically.

Dhahabu's past school experiences were seemingly very different from Angela's. This difference mainly emanated from their immigrant status. Angela followed her mother, who relocated to the United States in pursuit of further schooling, while Dhahabu's family moved to the United States as refugees.[9] Prior to coming to the United States, Dhahabu had attended school at a refugee camp in Tanzania. The conditions at her former school might explain Dhahabu's low academic ability. School in Tanzania was "terrible," lamented Dhahabu. According to Dhahabu, curriculum at the camp consisted only of two subjects, Math and

[9] This analysis is based on my interpretation of the girls' comments as I attempt to discern the differences in the academic achievement between these two girls. This claim was not made by any of the girls; rather it is my own interpretation.

Kirundi, her home language. Educational challenges Dhahabu faced at the camp affected her tremendously once she joined school in the United States. She barely spoke any English and blamed this on the language policy of her former school. In Tanzania, instruction was in Kirundi up until 5th grade when it shifted to Swahili and French in 7th grade. She added that "this causes too much confusion." This confusion, complained Dhahabu, arose from the numerous languages of instruction used in Tanzanian schools. While Angela found school more difficult back home in Kenya, Dhahabu believed the contrary. In this regard she stated:

> Education here is of a higher level than what I was used to in Tanzania. We never use to learn much back there. The teachers here are also very polite and nicer than back home and they are also more committed. At home some teachers would always go to the market to drink alcohol and come to school drunk to teach. When they are drunk, they are very harsh to students. I was so afraid of them. When I see them drunk, I would ask for permission to go home. Sometimes they would let me go. Sometimes they would refuse. From the above sentiments, it is not surprising that Dhahabu was struggling in school.

According to Dhahabu, absenteeism was a big problem back in Tanzania. She confessed to missing school on many occasions, and blamed this on her teachers who she claimed were "not serious."

Because of the above problems and other situations that are characteristic of education in refugee camps, Dhahabu's schooling was interrupted on numerous occasions. She complained that school would close for long periods of time. Things did not get better for Dhahabu once she relocated to the United States; in fact, one could argue that her schooling situation became even more challenging. As I discuss later in the chapter and elsewhere, when she first joined her current school, Dhahabu was placed five grade levels above where she had been back home in Tanzania. Despite protests from her parents, school officials justified this move by pointing to her age, which they claimed warranted her to be in 9th and not 4th grade.

I saw a similar pattern in both Belinda's and Zura's accounts. As a former refugee, Zura's educational experiences paralleled Dhahabu's. Attending school at the refugee camp back in her native country Sudan, non-committed teachers, and a disorganized school curriculum were some of the experiences that Zura shared with Dhahabu. Even though she learned to speak English very well, Zura shared similarity with Dhahabu: she barely spoke English when she initially arrived in the U.S. In contrast, Belinda, like Angela, did not complain much about her schooling experiences back in Zambia, her native country. In fact, Belinda seemed to suggest that schooling was of higher quality in Zambia. According to Belinda, U.S. schools do not foster competition among students. She claimed that competition motivated her to work hard in school. However, she did voice concern over the high tuition fees charged by the public schools she attended in Zambia.

Despite the enormous challenges associated with these girls' prior schooling experiences, these were not the only determinants for schooling outcomes. From these girls' accounts, teachers were just as significant in shaping their academic outcomes.

Role of teachers and other school officials in helping students construct achievement identities

Good teachers

Participants' accounts suggested that their teachers played important roles in shaping their academic selves. This was reflected through their interactions with their teachers. Their accounts depicted varying degrees of interactions. However, they shared the view that good teachers were the ones who helped them become better students. Conchas (2001) found that minority students' success greatly depends upon the level of institutional support in the school. In his study of Latino students, Conchas found that students and teachers interact with and

respond to each other in "distinct" ways. Students, Conchas argued, "Became active agents" in creating their own success as they "interacted with the school structure and culture" (p. 71). According to Conchas (2006), interaction with teachers was part of the structural and cultural processes.

Participants' relationship with their teachers seemed pivotal in influencing their achievement and experiences in school. The four girls perceived institutional agents including teachers in a variety of ways. Both Angela's and Dhahabu's accounts indicated a close relationship with some of their teachers. Even though Angela did not interact much with her teachers, her confidence in her academic ability mainly emanated from how the teachers viewed her. For one, she was confident of her "smartness," because her teachers reminded her all the time of how "smart" she was. Her mother was also aware of the teachers' positive views of her daughter's academic ability, because "teachers mention this to her all the time she goes for parents' conferences." Angela admits that she was more engaged in classes with the teachers she liked. She explained, "Usually I am very quiet, but I like Geometry and I like the teacher so I talk a lot in that class. I am kind of really good at Algebra, so I am also kind of loud too. In French class, I talk a lot too because I like the teacher. English I am like kind of quiet but in Science I participate too." Angela said that if she was "too quiet in class" the teacher might not notice her much. She explained:

> I am usually like really quiet, so teachers don't treat me differently. Some classes I am really quiet and some I help people a lot and I am allowed to by the teacher, so it just depends with the class. Some teachers talk to me and some don't. Some say hi and bye when they meet me in the hallway but not like have a conversation.

From the above excerpt we glean that Angela was not concerned that the teacher did not pay attention to her. She did not believe that the teacher was ignoring her either. Rather, she interpreted the lack of attention as being a result of her passiveness in class. Additionally, the

fact that other students always turned to her for help in Math class was confirmation in her view that the teacher was aware of her. Knowing this helped reinforce confidence in her academic capabilities.

Like Angela, Dhahabu did not interact much with her teachers. The only school personnel she had any meaningful relationship with seemed to be the ESL staff, who she refers to as Mrs. Lorenzo. Even then, there were indications that Dhahabu did not fully comprehend Mrs. Lorenzo's role in school, she knew that she and other students like her could rely on Mrs. Lorenzo whenever they needed assistance in school. Mrs. Lorenzo appeared to be a resource person for English Language Learners. In the following excerpt, Dhahabu provides a glimpse of what Mrs. Lorenzo's role might be at Diversity High:

> I talk to Mrs. Lorenzo though we can talk to any other teacher but I prefer to talk to Mrs. Lorenzo because she is very helpful. She will offer to take you to the office and also help you with learning English.

Still, Dhahabu was not sure whether Mrs. Lorenzo is a teacher or not. She tried to explain Mrs. Lorenzo's role:

> I don't know if she is a teacher but I think she just helps us. I see her take things to the office. Like when there is an exam she takes them from the office. Whenever I have a problem, I can also talk to a teacher who then will tell Miss Lorenzo my problem. If I need help with my work, I will talk to Miss Lorenzo to help me.

From Dhahabu's account, I could not discern the role Mrs. Lorenzo played at Diversity High. Her description of Mrs. Lorenzo is further evidence of Dhahabu's lack of clarity of how the school worked.

Participants' interaction with teachers also depended on how much they liked the teachers and the classes, and their capabilities in those classes. For instance, Zura interacted more with the teachers she liked:

> There are some teachers that I like better than others of course. I love my Science teacher because he is really nice and he always says hi when you meet him. He is nice to everybody. I think all my teachers are nice too, they just don't say much. But above all teachers my Math teacher, I think likes me more because she is always like "You can do this," "You do not have to do this," and she is always telling us stuff. I talk to her more than other teachers. I am not scared to ask her questions if I don't understand something.

According to Zura, good teachers continuously encourage their students to achieve their potential. In Belinda's case, she interacted more with the teacher of her "favorite" subject, Social Studies. She stated:

> I do talk with every teacher but there are some specific teachers I talk to more. But for some teachers I just feel lazy and I feel I know the stuff but when I want to know some specific stuff that is when I ask more like my favorite subject Social Studies, I ask more questions than other subjects.

She admits that she does not take much interest in teachers except her Social Studies teacher. Her interest in the subject encourages her to interact with the teacher.

These narratives, as well as those of Angela and Dhahabu, suggested that they interacted more with their "favorite" teachers. When asked why they liked the teachers they responded similarly, these were the "good" teachers. Good teachers in the girls' opinion were the teachers who were approachable and "easy to talk to." Zura explained her views:

> Good can mean many things because some teachers can be nice just because they have to. Good teachers take time to try and make you learn something. They have patience with you if you do not understand a lesson or something. They will remind you to turn in things if you forgot. They will help you if you need anything. I just think it is nice of them to do that. Plus they genuinely want you to learn.

In Zura's opinion, her Chemistry teacher exemplified a good teacher:

> My Chemistry teacher is a good teacher. She explains things to you and if you do not understand, she gives us like half an hour after class and she sits at her desk so that if anybody wants help or something she tells us to go to her because she says she understands that some people are shy to ask question out loudly. She says "If you have any questions come to me, and sometimes." She stays like two hours after school if

> people want to see her. As long someone wants to see her, she will stay, however long it takes.

Dhahabu supported the above view:

> You see like if a teacher gives us work and then he or she sees that I am struggling with it and when I ask for the help they say "do it yourself," I can say that is not a good teacher. But if I say I need help and the teacher says, "Come, I can help you" then I will say that is a good teacher. Then I will wait he helps me. The teacher can ask me what I am doing after school then if I say nothing, he will say "come after school." But if they say "No after school and no help," then I can say that is not a good teacher. I can't say a teacher has ever said no when I asked them for help. All of my teachers are always willing to help me. Also a teacher who talks to me every day and says hi to me, that's a good teacher too. My Math teacher, I asked her "If the test comes and I do not know how to do it, will you help me?" Then he said, "I will help you." And true to his word he was very helpful to me on the day of the exam.

Participants agreed that most of their teachers were "good." Good teachers, in the girls' view, are teachers who care for their students, are always there for them and acknowledge their presence by greeting them when they encounter students outside of the classroom. They viewed good teachers as the ones who go out of their way to be helpful to students.

Notably, other than Angela, none of the other three participants pointed to actual teaching or instruction when describing a "good" teacher. They emphasized "caring" and "helping" and "taking time outside of classroom to help" as attributes of a good teacher. Neither did they mention classroom management. It is understandable that neither Zura nor Angela referred to classroom management as a sign of good teaching. This is because their accounts of class at Dynamo High School depicted organized classrooms and lessons. On the other hand, Diversity High participants, Belinda and Dhahabu, alluded to chaotic, almost out-of-control classes. For these two girls, their understanding of a "good" teacher was limited to how teachers "care" for students rather than how they manage the classroom. In fact, even though Belinda acknowledged these distractions, she claimed they did not bother her because she "minds her

own business" in class. Dhahabu also preferred teachers who were "at ease" with students and "sometimes joke around" with their students.

The strategies used by teachers to organize students in class also had implications for how these girls thought of achievement and constructed their achievement identities. Where they sat and who they sat next to appear to have some influence on how well they did in a subject. For instance, Belinda noted "that sometimes you sit next a smart person, who can assist you when you need help with you your work." Other times, she added, one could sit next to distracting students "who always cause trouble for teachers" in class. The four girls noted that sometimes teachers would give students latitude to choose where they wanted to sit in class, but most of the time students had no choice because their teachers assigned seats. According to Belinda, in most of her classes, teachers were in charge of assigning seats. For example, she described the seating arrangement in her Social Studies class in the following way:

> My Social Studies class we have assigned seats. So everybody sits where the teacher says, and we sit there for the rest of the semester. The teacher puts anybody to sit anywhere because she does not want to put those people who she knows will make noise and won't pay attention in class when they sit close to one another. So she tries to separate them in to sit in different parts. That way they can pay attention when she is teaching.

Belinda's interaction in class matched her views of friendship. She claimed that she did not seek help from any of her peers sitting next to her in class and added that she would rather be "concentrating on work so that I can get done with it." On the other hand, Dhahabu, Zura and Angela all had mixed feelings regarding how teachers organized students in class. Belinda was the only one who preferred assigned seats. While making no direct reference to herself, she justified her preference in the following excerpt:

> I think assigning seats helps students to focus more because I remember last semester the 6th hour was my Math class some students complained that they did not pass the class

> because some people used to make noise when the class was going on. I don't know, maybe because he or she is being influenced by friends who are nearby, because if the friend does not work, she also does not work so they only make noise. If the teacher tries to talk to them in a good way, they yell at her. So the teacher decided to separate everybody, like from a close friend, like to put them next to people who they don't talk too much. When she assigned seats, I feel like students started concentrating in their work and their progress in grades started like going up.

Unlike Diversity High, participants from Dynamo High experienced both strategies and stated that teachers alternate between the two approaches. Angela described her Algebra and Geometry classes in the following way:

> In Algebra we sit around our friends and you pick who you want to sit next to and in Geometry the teacher puts the smart people with those people who don't get it so they can get help. But in both of my classes, I usually sit with my friends. In Algebra the teacher does not allocate the seats but in Geometry the teacher does. The way she has arranged it is friends sit with friends but it is still assigned. This will change every semester. Like last semester, we had assigned seats and we did not sit with friends but that changed, this semester we are sitting with friends. You kind of choose who to sit with.

Like other participants, Angela understood the importance of sitting close to a resourceful student. Angela's Math teacher expected her gifted students to assist their struggling peers in class. She complained, however, of the pressure this had on "smart" students. Still, she was not sure which of the two strategies she preferred:

> I kind of don't like both of them. I feel like I take so much time explaining things to other people and this takes so much of my time. Like my friends, the one who sit by me rely on so much on me that they don't pay attention in class because they still know I will help them. I like the sitting arrangement in Algebra because I am not very good at Algebra as I am in Geometry. In Algebra I get more help from my friends.

Even though she also benefitted from her peers in classes which she was not "good" at, she seemed frustrated and almost angry at her experiences in her Geometry class where many students looked up to her for help. She complained:

> So many of my friends want me help them. I have this one friend; she does not get it when the teacher is teaching, so she never pays any attention to the teacher, she just waits for me to explain it to her. After the teacher has explained everything, she turns to me and says "OK Angela, help me now." When I ask if she understood, she is like "No! I did not get anything." So I just help her. It's a bit distracting for me because there are some topics I don't understand and I want to pay attention too.

Where the girls sat and who they sat next to influenced participants' view of their chance for academic success. Angela, Zura and Dhahabu believed that their performance had been impacted in some ways by their peers, while Belinda did not.

Knowledge of school operational structure and school success

How did the four girls understand the *institutional processes* that can shape achievement? If they understood them well, how did they navigate these processes? How did these influence or shape the ways in which they constructed their achievement-oriented selves? Conchas (2006) contends that minority students' understanding of institutional mechanisms in school can lead to academic success. *Institutional processes* in this case refer to schooling procedures and policies, including the support system available to students that help them succeed. I argue that understanding the operational structures allowed the girls to take advantage of the support system and the opportunities available leading to success in school. Participants' narratives demonstrated variations in the ways in which they understood school policies and procedures. I argue that these differences might influence the girls' academic outcomes. In this respect, while the four girls expected to succeed in school, the two participants from Dynamo High School had a better understanding of how to navigate the schooling system to attain educational success. On the other hand, the two girls from Diversity High School were not as conversant with these institutional processes.

For instance, as a high achiever, Angela possessed the cultural capital to successfully navigate the school system. She understood the importance of extra-curricular activities, such as sports, for her future educational plans. Thus, Angela attempted to construct an "athletic" identity even though she was not good at sports. She first attempted soccer and failed, then she tried track and did not make it on this school team either. Sports, she complained, "just took too much time away from study." In the end, Angela realized she was "not good at all" in sports and was "wasting time" trying to be an athlete. Angela tried her hand on an "easier" extra-curricular activity by joining the African Students Association and serving as the club's President. Angela's attempt to construct an "athletic" identity was at odds with her "achievement-oriented identity." She complained that she invested such a big proportion of her time practicing sports that it was beginning to interfere with her studies. Despite the time and effort that Angela put in track, her athletic skills did not improve. Even though attempting sports was part of her future educational plans, she gave it up as her extra-curricular activity and joined a non-sporting activity which she claimed "does not take much time" but still served the same purpose. According to Angela, she engaged in these extra-curricular activities in preparation for college. This point demonstrates her knowledge of the school culture and structure.

Salazar (1997) posits that for racial and ethnic minority students, school success has never been" a simply a matter of learning and competently performing technical skills" rather and more fundamentally, "it has been a matter of learning how to decode the system" (p. 13). Reproduction theorists posit that students who possess the dominant cultural capital are able to navigate the system and thus attain success in school. Of the four girls, Dhahabu appeared to be the least informed about how to navigate the schooling system, while Angela seemed to be the savviest in this respect. Angela and Dhahabu provide an interesting contrast. As stated earlier,

Angela was very articulate about her future educational goals. She was engaged in multiple school activities that she believed would facilitate her success in school. She had clearly bought into the dominant ideals of schooling. She wanted to go to a good college and understood the processes that could help her to attain that goal.

Extra-curricular activities are not just important for future educational possibilities. Studies on youth networks such as Hanks and Eckland (1976) have established that extra-curricular activities can be avenues for peer acceptance and an additional source of social capital for young people. According to Hanks and Eckland (1976), extra-curricular activities not only help foster academic success via social networks, they also facilitate self-esteem and self-confidence. Angela was a perfect example of this. In addition to sports, Angela was a member of the National Honor Society and was the president of the African Students Association, a position which speaks highly of her leadership qualities. When I asked how she ended up in that position, she replied that her teachers nominated her. Again, this demonstrates the confidence her teachers had in her.

In contrast, Dhahabu appeared not to have a clear understanding of what school policies meant and the implication this would have on her future plans, academic or otherwise. For instance, at the beginning of the semester the study took place, she still had no information of what her GPA was. Yet, she made no effort to try and find out why the school had not revealed this to her. Still, not knowing her grade was not just a simple case of recklessness or not caring for education. I have established that Dhahabu cared for school and wanted to succeed. In my view, this could have been her strategy of resisting dominant ideals of success. Additionally, even though she declared her intention of going to college, she had no plan or strategy in place on how she would get there. Again, this demonstrated lack of understanding the intricacies of

college preparation. For one, she was not and had never been involved in any extra-curricular activity at her school. She did not play any sports or belong to any club, and, most importantly, there was no indication of meaningful relationships with institutional agents other than her ESL teacher.

Dhahabu was aware that some of her teachers expected the least from her. For instance, while emphasizing the importance of passing her Math class, the teacher informed her that graduating from school hinged on whether she would make it in that class. Dhahabu complained that it seemed to her as if the teacher expected her to fail the class. Her teacher explained that if she failed the class, she would have to drop out of school. Passing the Math class was therefore crucial to Dhahabu. Yet Dhahabu admitted that she never once approached her teacher for help. She seemed resigned and accepting of what she saw as inevitable – failing the class and eventually dropping out of school.

Dhahabu explained the repercussions of failing the class, but it was clear that she did not understand the policy. The following exchange ensued when I pressed her for further details about failing and withdrawing from school:

> Betty: So you cannot continue with school once you are over 19 years?
>
> Dhahabu: Yes I think so. One of my teachers told me to try and pass all my classes because I am in grade 11 and I have to pass to go to grade 12 so that I can finish high school. He told me if I remain in 11th grade, then the next year they will remove me from school because of my years. I am 17 now and next year I will be 18. Then if I remain in 11th grade, I will go to 12th grade when I am 19. They told me you can only stay in school until you are 18. This year ends they will terminate two Burundians that I know of because of their age. They are both 19 years old.
>
> Betty: Where do these students go then?
> Dhahabu: I don't know. Maybe they go to college. Maybe the community college, I am not sure.
>
> Betty: Does the school help enroll such students in school?

> Dhahabu: No they look for the college themselves. They help with the process a bit because they take you there and show you. You do the rest for yourself.

It is evident that Dhahabu did not understand the meaning of this particular policy even though it had dire repercussions for her. Dhahabu was worried that like her older siblings, she might not be able to complete high school. It would be too simplistic to assume that Dhahabu is not concerned, because she was extremely concerned about not graduating from high school.

Dhahabu's limited knowledge of how the system operated does not mean that she could not notice structural flaws. This was evident when I asked how she felt when she was informed that she might not graduate. She explained:

> You know so many people have intervened and tried to speak for me, but that's just the policy. They say that once your age reaches 18 you should just leave. The teachers say they have no control over that. But I think these people are very smart because they remove you very slowly without you being aware of what is going on. Before you know it, it is time to go. When you ask them why this is happening, some tell you it is "a job that someone has to do." It is not their wish to do this…it is a government's rule. For them it is a job….just a job.

Even though not critical of the system, Dhahabu is still aware of the injustices that she and other immigrant students face in school. She sees these injustices even though she does not actively challenge what other people say or seek outside help. But she still holds on and works, hoping to reach her goal of graduating from high school.

Parents' role

Parents played an important role in shaping these participants' academic identities. Angela's mother particularly stood out in this respect. For instance, on the bumper of her car, she had a sticker reading "My child is an honors student." This speaks to her pride regarding Angela's academic accomplishments. Like Angela, her mother was equally proud of her "honors student" label and helped to validate it. Angela's family background provided her with the necessary tools to succeed in school. Lareau (1987) provides insights into the relationship

between family background and educational outcomes. She argues that while there are different factors that could affect family-school relations and the degree of relations, she agrees there is a dominant type of relationship. According to Lareau (1987), in this type of relationship, parents are not only involved in the curricular aspects of schooling, but they also play an active role in the formal aspects of their children's cognitive development. In explaining the role of social capital to educational and life outcomes, Coleman (1987) similarly notes that parents' level of education can positively influence their children's schooling outcome. However, parents' level of education is not sufficient for children to succeed in school. He added that in the absence of a meaningful relationship with their children, high level of education will be irrelevant in the educational growth of their children. As a graduate student, Angela's mother understood this and provided her with the necessary support Angela needed to succeed in school. On numerous occasions, I found Angela and her mother discussing homework. I also witnessed her offering her academic-related guidance such as providing suggestions on which classes to enroll in at the beginning of the semester.

Just before the beginning of Fall semester, in the year I conducted the study, I ran into Angela's mother at the mall. She had just returned from visiting family in Africa. We exchanged a few pleasantries and inquired about each other's well-being. It had been a couple of weeks since I last saw Angela and naturally I inquired about her, too. "She is fine," her mother responded, "but I have to go to her school and see her teachers." She said Angela was doing well but was disappointed by her teachers and her school counselor. The last time I met Angela she was very happy and looking forward to the new school year. Her mother explained to me that Angela had registered for AP classes but she was not being allowed to take all of them. Angela's mother did not understand why the school was giving her daughter a difficult time to

enroll in the AP classes even though she was qualified. Her mother informed me that she was going to the school to find out what happened and to try and convince the teachers to allow Angela into the AP classes. A couple of weeks later, I ran into her mother, and she informed me that Angela managed to get into two of the AP classes she wanted and would take the other two later. This incident demonstrated that Angela and her mother not only knew and understood how to work the system but they could also advocate for themselves to get what they want. Angela's mother is familiar with the intricacies of the education system and can successfully intervene on her daughter's behalf in such events.

This is a sharp contrast from Dhahabu's case in which no amount of intervention from her parents would change her situation when they tried to advocate for their daughter to be placed in the right grade. In fact, Mr. Kabila, Dhahabu's father, informed me how frustrated he was with the school when he was trying to address his daughter's situation. When the school decided to place Dhahabu five grades higher than where she should have been, her father attempted on several occasions to intervene to no avail. He went to the school several times and spoke to the teachers, trying to convince them to rethink the decision, but the school ignored him. Given Dhahabu's limited English and academic skills, Mr. Kabila felt it would not serve Dhahabu well to be promoted five grades.

Lareau's (1987) argument is pertinent in understanding the differences in the ways Angela and Dhahabu's parents helped shape their daughters' academic selves. Dhahabu's mother is also a former teacher. She therefore had knowledge of how the school system works and could advocate for her daughter. As a result, school officials responded appropriately in Angela's case and granted her wish to enroll in the AP classes. On the other hand, Dhahabu's parents could neither speak nor write in English. In fact, on several occasions, I was called upon by her

parents to help translate school documents for their children. Clearly, Dhahabu's parents did not possess the social and cultural capital that can "facilitate their compliance with the dominant standards in school interactions" (Lareau, 1992, p. 42). In addition to their refugee status, Dhahabu's parents had to deal with a significant language barrier while negotiating various relationships in school. They were also worried that their third child would have to drop out of school for being over the legal age. When I asked Dhahabu what her parents were doing about this, she stated that like her, they felt powerless to do anything. Her parents believed that the school set their daughter up for failure when they placed her five grades above where they felt she should have been.

Conclusion

Examining the educational experiences of immigrant children can provide educators important insights into understanding their educational outcomes. As Ngo (2010) has argued, immigrant students' identities are shaped by many factors. Immigrants come from different backgrounds and therefore have different educational experiences which in turn influence their view of schooling differentially. In this chapter, I focused on participants' own views of what it means to be successful in school. In defining success, participants agreed on some views but diverged on others. They were consistent in mentioning GPA as a basis for gauging academic success but disagreed on what a GPA was. From the girls' accounts, one can discern a plausible connection between conceptions of smartness and their academic performance. When asked how they gauged achievement, they mentioned conventional measures for success such GPA, completion of assignments and class participation. However, GPA stood out as the fundamental indicator of academic success. In participants' views, "smartness" was not limited to academic aptitude but also included attributes such as resilience, determination, common sense, and effort.

Participants also agreed that in addition to GPA, school success entailed non-academic attributes. In this regard they mentioned attributes such as staying out of trouble in school and having "common sense" as essential to school success. Language was another significant factor in constructing their achievement selves. In this case, too, they had a range of views regarding the importance of language. Dhahabu, who was the least proficient in English, put the most emphasis on its effect. Speaking and writing English proficiently were regarded as requisites for success. Notably, three of the four girls said that Math was their favorite subject, in part because they considered Math's "universal language." Unlike other subjects where one had to be proficient in English, one could perform well in Math regardless of the level of English.

Finally, the premise of this chapter is that participants possessed varying degrees of social and cultural capital. This was reflected in the strategies they used to navigate the school system. Their accounts suggest the two girls from Dynamo High were more knowledgeable of the operational structure of the school and were clearly taking advantage of the resources available to make them better students. Angela, who best understood the intricacies of the system, reaped the most benefit out of it. Again, it is not surprising that of the four participants, she was the most academically successful. On the other hand, Dhahabu, who was struggling the most academically, seemed to lack the necessary social and cultural capital to successfully maneuver the school system. She seemed to have the least understanding of school expectations, had no meaningful relationships with either her teachers or peers, and was not involved in any extra-curricular activities.

In the next chapter, I continue with the discussion on how these girls navigated the school system. I do this, by specifically focusing on the notion of girlhood as it affected their engagement with school.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCERNING AFRICAN GIRLS' SUBJECTIVITIES: NAVIGATING THE TERRAIN OF GIRLHOOD IN HIGH SCHOOL

To have a clear picture of girls' experiences, Bettis and Adams (2005) urge that we must not only build frameworks that enable us to hear what girls are saying but also those that capture the diversity of their lives. Diversity means that girls exist and define themselves in numerous social worlds. In this study, I rely mainly on the girls' voices to illuminate strategies they used to navigate this space called "school." Similar to Kehily (2004), I recognize the cultural specificity of school as a "local site that exists in complex interactions with wider global processes relating to migration, economy and the culture" (p. 4). As such, the goal of this chapter is to illuminate how African immigrant girls locate themselves and how they read how others locate them in various social worlds within the school context – social worlds that are very much gendered. The social worlds that I refer to in this sense are both *spatial* (such as classrooms, hallways, sports and other extra-curricular activities) and *relational* (such as the relationships these girls developed in school with their peers, teachers and other school officials, and their parents). Nieto (1999) contends that students now attend schools that are far more complex and bureaucratic with more stringent demands and greater expectations than ever before. The goal of this chapter is to illuminate how participants responded to expectations such as those alluded to by Nieto, while mapping their social worlds, worlds that are very much gendered. I continue my argument from Chapter 4 that while participants shared a common "African" background, they mapped their social worlds differently, leading to differential educational experiences and outcomes.

In navigating the terrain of school, participants exhibited "multiplex subjectivities"[10] (p. 17). In doing this, the four girls were engaged in boundary work. While boundary making as a concept is not the focus of this chapter, it is worth noting that these girls drew boundaries based on dressing styles, academic achievement, and moral values. They used symbolic boundaries to distinguish themselves and exclude or include "other" girls. Symbolic boundaries were specifically used to differentiate who their friends were, who they hung out and spent time with, and how they sorted their peers into categories of "desirable and undesirable." To understand how and with whom the girls in the study interacted, like Warikoo (2010), I asked the youth to tell me about "the social groups in their schools [in order] to elicit what boundaries they themselves saw" (p. 429). To this end, I not only focus on how these girls constructed subjective identities but also how these processes were impacted by larger structural forces including race, ethnicity, social class and gender. I synonymously use the terms subjectivities, subject identities and local identity to mean the situated identities that the girls constructed in their day-to-day interactions and actions in school. I was specifically interested in how peer and girl culture influenced the ways in which these girls made meaning of their multiple identities. Ultimately, my goal was to illuminate these African girls' experiences within their school context.

To capture this complexity, I focus on different aspects of the girl's experiences. For instance, concern over body image was one of the major issues that influenced the ways in which these girls defined and positioned themselves. Physical appearance and style of dressing were particularly salient in this regard. I begin this chapter by focusing on the notion of "beauty." In the next section, I concentrate on notions of belonging. Pressure to fit in stood out in this respect. In this case, I focus mainly on the girls' relationships with peers, both boys and girls. I

[10] This is a term used by Renato Rosaldo for individuals exhibiting "cross-cutting identifications" (Cited in Wolf, 1996, p.17)

illuminate not only how these girls positioned themselves but also how they positioned other girls while navigating school. Here, I also discuss different cliques and social groups that existed in their schools. When asked how they distinguished these social groups, they named clothes and looks as significant markers for drawing distinctions among groups. Finally, participants' narratives attest that African girls are not a homogeneous group. I argue that despite their common African background, participants in the study came from diverse cultural settings consequently leading to a range of educational experiences and views of school. Participants gave accounts that simultaneously reinforced and challenged existing discourse on girlhood. My goal in this chapter is therefore not to develop a comparative experience of these girls but to provide insights that simultaneously explore the girls' commonalities and differences.

"I just look at myself and not another person when I think of beauty": Participants' views on beauty

Girls are bombarded by messages from different sources regarding beauty, but none is as influential as the mass media. Beauty magazines and TV shows reinforce these messages by emphasizing a particular type of femininity and beauty, one that depicts "perfect" women with "perfect" bodies (Bordo, 1997, p. 36). In this regard, Hall (2002) points to "media discourses and popular youth cultural forms" as shaping Diaspora population (p. 40). Scholars studying girls including Gillian (1992), Adams and Bettis (2003), Fordham (1993), Orenstein (1994), and Inness (1998) have determined that although there are different forms of femininity, very few versions are deemed appropriate in the larger society and girls feel the pressure to conform to these narrow versions. Bordo (1997) reiterates that images of models in magazines set standards of feminine beauty. He explains the pressure teenage girls go through as a result of this:

> Today's teenagers no longer have the luxury of a distinction between what's required of a fashion model and what's required of them; the perfect images have become our

> dominant realities and have set standards for us all – standards that are unreal in their demand for us. (p. 116)

Contemporary girls have responded to the above pressures in different ways. I regard these responses as forms of agency. I therefore view *normative femininity* as a "contested construct that is highly resisted, appropriated and assumed" (Bettis & Adams, 2005, p. 61).

Against this backdrop, let us consider the case of Gaubourey Sidibe, an African American actress who rose to sudden fame as a result of her highly acclaimed role in the award-winning film *Precious*. I use Sidibe's example to illustrate the media influence on how this society conceives beauty. In March 2010, *Vanity Fair,* one of the leading fashion magazines, featured on its foldout cover, nine young upcoming actresses who they referred to as the fresh faces of Hollywood. The nine included, Abbie Cornish, Kristen Stewart, Carey Mulligan, Amanda Seyfried, Rebecca Hall, Mia Wasikowska, Anna Kendrick, Emma Stone, and Evan Rachel Wood, all very successful young actresses. What was also common about these nine women is that they are thin and White. What was missing, as many would later argue, was the most compelling breakthrough of the year, Gaubourey Sidibe. Ironically, Sidibe was featured inside the same edition. Her front cover snub did not go unnoticed. Shortly after the magazine was published, a huge public outcry followed questioning the intentions of the magazine. Sidibe had had an amazing year. In her debut acting role in *Precious* based on the book *Push*, she had been nominated for an Oscar (the highest recognition of achievement in Hollywood), among other awards. While the magazine acknowledged these milestones, they still did not feature her on the front cover as one of the new "successful" young actresses. She was young yes, and fresh, no doubt, but was she "the face of Hollywood?" Critics wondered if she was snubbed because of her color or because she was bigger than the average Hollywood leading ladies.

Sidibe does not conform to Hollywood ideals of beauty. She is not a thin girl. In follow-up interview with Access Hollywood, reported in the New York, Daily News, Sidibe lightheartedly stated that she was not worried about being snubbed by the magazine. She stated, "I come from a world where I'm not on covers and I'm not in magazines at all. And so I was happy to be in the magazine." Sidibe added, "One day I decided that I was beautiful, and so I carried out my life as if I was a beautiful girl…. It doesn't have anything to do with how the world perceives you. What matters is what you see" (New York Daily News, February, 2010).

Sidibe's remarks in many ways echoed my participants' views on acceptance and beauty. Emphasis on mental and emotional rather than physical attributes, non-conformity to Hollywood beauty ideals, and cognizance of the lack of people of color as role models in beauty magazines were some of Sidibe's points that were reiterated by participants. Kunz and Harvey (2000) found that racial and cultural stereotypes in media and pop culture also have a negative effect on refugee and immigrant youths self-perception and peer acceptance. Hussein et al. (2006) similarly posit that racist and sexist media messages have profound negative effects on the identity formation of refugee and immigrant youth. This is because of the media's influence in dictating what is socially acceptable as beauty.

Research has established the link between concern over body image and girls' self-confidence and academic outcomes. Given this concern, I wanted to find out how the four girls perceived beauty. I use Sidibe as a reference to illustrate how Hollywood, through mass media, sets standards for beauty and how these ideals may in turn be engraved in the minds of young girls and women. Given what research has consistently found about the pressures mass culture imposes on young girls and women in this society, I was interested to find out if and how girls from different cultures in Africa are influenced by these pressures. To determine this, I asked

them questions such as, "How do you define beauty?" "Which celebrity do you consider beautiful, and why?" I was surprised that all of these girls seemed to admonish celebrity figures. I found that these four girls did not seek external validation in regard to beauty. They emphasized that beauty is more than looks. Beauty, according to them, is more about positive attitude than physical appearance. They shared Sidibe's sentiments that "beauty comes from within." However, this might not come as a surprise, as research has already established that comparatively, Black girls are not easily influenced by mass culture and therefore are more positive and self-confident about their bodies than their White counterparts. It has been further established that they maintain a strong sense of self and self-esteem during adolescence (Fordham, 1993; Harris, 2004; Robinson and Ward, 1991).

I found this to be equally true of my participants. For instance, none of them named a Caucasian celebrity as their role model for beauty. In fact, other than Zura, who named Beyonce, a successful African-American singer, the other three girls denied being influenced by pop culture. However, sometimes I found their actions to be in conflict with what they were telling me. For instance, even though they insisted on being indifferent to the above pressures, on numerous occasions, Angela, Zura and Dhahabu dressed in the same clothes they criticized. They wore shorts, short skirts and dresses, and occasionally even wore make-up. Therefore, even though they were consistent in their espoused definition of beauty, their actions sometimes were inconsistent with their views. This contradiction seems to suggest that despite their denials, there are times when these girls succumbed to pressures of girlhood.

Performing normative femininity: Pressures to fit in

Cultural expectations and conventions regarding girls' lives are filled with contradictory messages about physical, emotional and even academic attributes (Lipkin, 2009). Accordingly,

adolescence is a challenging period for girls because they are trying to make sense of these contradictory messages (Bettis & Adams, 2005). Bettis and Adams (2005) contend, "On one hand, popular culture glorifies and commodifies female adolescent bodies as ideal sexualized bodies; on the other hand they are suspect in institutional spheres of school church and family as a tainted body in need of control" (p. 11). These contradictory messages have been found to negatively affect young women's self-esteem and consequently their academic success. In my study, the girls' narratives revealed the struggles and confusion they faced in trying to juggle these expectations. Angela and Zura, in particular, denounced their peers who followed crowds and were not their own persons. In their view, conforming to peer expectation was a manifestation of lack of independence. "Codes of feminine behavior" (Lipkin, 2009, p. 22) further constrict girls from achieving their educational and career aspirations. For instance, society expects girls to be proud of and embrace their bodies and sexuality, but at the same time the media idealizes a certain body type and behavior. Mass culture provides girls and women with messages about what is considered culturally beautiful. Lipkin (2009) asserts:
Young girls are told to be ambitious, assertive and to follow their dreams but this can be misconstrued as being to be aggressive and masculine. Young girls are also told to be themselves and be proud of whom they are but they are also expected to "perform certain type of femininity" (p. 22). Lipkin (2009) adds that girls are also expected to be active in sports but being too athletic also connotes masculine attributes. Women are told to be sexy and attractive but are also condemned for being sluts.

Participants' narratives reiterated the above concerns. Girls at Dynamo High exemplified the above argument. Zura and Angela especially displayed contradicting and conflicting notions of femininity – sometimes they conformed to the middle-class heterosexual "ideal" femininity,

but often time they resisted and asserted their own form of femininity. For example, they both claimed they did not care about clothes (specifically what they wore to school) but from what I observed in and out of school, the girls wore typical clothes I observed other teenage girls in their school wearing (e.g. tight fitting jeans, t-shirts, shorts, hooded shirts, etc.). In addition, even though none of them admitted to having boyfriends, they spoke of close friends who had boyfriends with whom they regularly interacted. This, in my view, demonstrates that even though they spoke of their parents restricting them from dating, except for Belinda, dating for these girls was not necessarily out of the question. In addition, dating was viewed by the girls through a heterosexual lens. While they were all tolerant of their gay peers, they did not approve of their lifestyle. Zura described them as a "depressed" group of students who "like to cut themselves" and "wear skirts"; Belinda and Dhahabu regarded them as "sinners"; and Angela called them "weird."

For high school girls, physical appearance is important because it determines many aspects of their lives. Indeed, it determines the quality of experiences they will have at school. Even though they denied being influenced by these pressures, participants were aware of the issues adolescent girls grapple with. According to the four girls, pressure to fit in was a big concern for girls in their schools. Participants were similarly consistent in their views regarding body image. In their view, body image was one of the major concerns for girls in their schools. They concurred that "fat girls" and girls who "don't look good" face many difficulties at school. In her groundbreaking book *Reviving Ophelia* Mary Pipher (date) describes this condition as a "problem without a name" (p. 12). In what she describes as "lookism" (Pipher, 1994, p. 40), Pipher argues that girls are judged mainly by their appearance. Zura's view exemplified this point:

> One of my friends all she talks about is that she wants to lose weight because every girl is so skinny and she feels like she is not pretty. I think she is pretty, like she looks good the way she is, but she just thinks that everybody is just skinny in the school and she wants to lose weight and stuff even though she is not big. She is a little bit thick but not big. She looks fine to me she does not need to get skinny I think. Also with guys, especially a lot of the younger girls, like the freshmen, like, they want to get the guys' attention and they feel like if they get the guys' attention they are prettier. I don't know what's going on in their minds. They just need to get like all the guys' attention. It does not make them look so good but they think that if a guy talks to them it means they are pretty.

Angela reiterated Zura's point below when I asked her about struggles adolescent girls face in school. Body image issues are not limited to physical attributes. The type of clothes one wore was similarly a concern for girls in their school. Pressure to look a certain way was so enormous for some of the girls that they had unrealistic expectations – demanding new clothes even though their parents could not afford them. Angela explained:

> There is peer pressure obviously to look and wear the latest fashion or whatever. People also want to come to school with new clothes. I would say many girls in our school feel pressure, yes. I would say a lot but not the majority. Some of these girls really go out of their way to get new clothes even if their parents cannot afford them.

The above sentiments demonstrate that participants are aware of the struggles adolescent girls go through. Zura not only acknowledged struggles her peers were going through as adolescents, but she also realized the severity and impact this might have on them. Participants accounts suggested that girls in the two schools were involved in what Nichter and Vuckovic (1994) and Barkty (1994) cited in Olafson (2006) refer to as *body works*. They explain "body works" as the effort girls put in the attempt to improve their bodies and achieve perfection. According to Barkty (1994), these efforts are meant to produce a body that is "recognizably feminine" (p. 93). Regardless of the above views, participants echoed similar views when asked how they coped with this kind of pressure. While all four girls acknowledged the pressure girls in their schools faced in their attempts to conform to the "popular body image" (Olafson, 2006), they all downplayed these pressures and denied personally being influenced by these concerns.

This was particularly pertinent when I asked the girls to describe their perspectives on beauty. Rather than focus on the physical or material aspects, they emphasized the emotional and intellectual aspects of girls' lives as signifiers of beauty. For instance, Angela thought that a beautiful woman is a "strong woman who is not pushed around by boys." She explained:

> A beautiful woman is a strong woman who has the "you had better not touch me attitude." They are not weak. They just act tough. So, I think this makes the boys scared of them.

Zura on the other hand equated beauty with "not making a fool of oneself," or "being able to take care of oneself," and "having a good attitude." She added that there were some girls in school who "look pretty but have a bad attitude."

As I stated earlier, the media plays a huge role in shaping and reinforcing societal views of what is considered "ideal" beauty. Magazines such as *Elle, Bazaar,* and *Cosmopolitan,* and youth magazines such as *Seventeen* are filled with images of the ideal female--thin, White and - which many young girls buy into. Even though they, too, downplayed the pressures of girlhood in their lives, Angela and Zura admitted to being avid readers of some of these magazines. They also admitted to keeping up with celebrity news. Ironically, when I asked them which celebrity they considered beautiful, all of them except Zura did not admit to looking up to celebrities as models for beauty. In my view, by resisting "mainstream" ideals of beauty, the four girls demonstrated agency, but exercised this in different ways.

Angela claimed that a beautiful woman is one that is "natural" and "does not need make-up to look beautiful like some of the celebrities." Angela pointed out that she admires India Arie, a Black Soul singer who is known for music as well as her 'natural' looks. Angela claimed that she admires India Arie's natural hair and added that the singer inspires her.

Of the four girls, Belinda was least tolerant of popular culture. It was obvious that she did not "care much for Hollywood stuff or celebrities." When asked which celebrity she thought was beautiful, she responded emphatically, "I think I am beautiful." She emphasized:

> You have to look at yourself and believe in yourself before you look at someone else. I just look at myself and not another person when I think of beauty. You have to believe in yourself as a girl.

Unlike their counterparts from Dynamo High, Belinda and Dhahabu admitted that they did not keep up with celebrity news. Belinda specifically claimed that she had not been influenced by pop culture because her family did not watch much TV. When they did, she claimed they only watched soccer and cartoons. Neither did she read entertainment magazines. Again, like in other aspects in her life, Belinda attributes her Christian background for sheltering her from such "negative" influences.

On the other hand, Zura appeared to be the most influenced by pop culture. Unlike the other three girls who were reluctant to name celebrities as their idols, Zura was quick to mention Beyonce, the famous African American hip-hop musician, as her idol. She admitted that she had always admired the famous singer because she is beautiful and can sing well. She stated that Beyonce had a "nice figure." Having a "nice figure," according to Zura, meant that one was neither "fat" nor "skinny." Still, even though Zura subscribed to Hollywood measures of beauty, like other participants, her view of beauty was not limited to physical attributes. She emphasized that beauty is "when you can take care of yourself and have a positive attitude." Dhahabu echoed Zura's sentiments and added that a beautiful person is one who "talks nicely" to her and "cares and loves other people." Given the bullying and harassment that Dhahabu had undergone related to her appearance, it is not surprising that she made these remarks. According to Dhahabu, beauty is not about the "outside" but rather about a person's inner attributes. She

adamantly stated that physical beauty should not matter; rather how a person treats and interacts with others should demonstrate a person's true beauty.

Clothes as markers for social class and status

Dressing was another aspect of the girls' lives that stood out in their narratives. How one dressed was a 'major signifier of acceptance" (Jiwani et al., 2006, p. 78). Participants admitted that popularity was important for girls in school. To be popular, one had to fit in, look, dress and act in a way that was deemed acceptable. They agreed that not conforming to fashion trends usually led to isolation and loneliness for girls in their schools. For example, Angela remarked that students "dress in ways so that they don't feel excluded." Participants' actions at the beginning of the new semester, the year this study took place, exemplified this point. As the end of the summer holiday approached, Angela and her sister Mabel were preoccupied with what they were going to wear for the new school year. Like many teenage girls, trips to the mall became frequent for Angela and her sister as they prepared to go back to school. On several occasions they requested a ride from me to go shopping at the local mall as their mother, who usually does this, had travelled out of the country. Clearly, it was important to these two girls that they begin the new school year with new clothes. Regardless, when asked why she felt the need to buy new clothes at the beginning of the school year, Angela still denied giving in to the pressure to shop for or wear new clothes to school. She downplayed it by claiming that she does it "because everybody does it." Angela understood this pressure very well. In the exchange below, Angela agrees that there is pressure for girls to buy new clothes and look trendy even if their parents cannot afford them.

> Betty: You have said before that girls in your school feel the pressure to buy new clothes when school opens for the year?

Angela: I think it depends on the type of person you are. Of course there is peer pressure obviously to look and wear the latest fashion or whatever and have new clothes. Many girls in our school feel pressure yeah. I would say a lot but not the majority. Some of these girls really go out of their way to get new clothes even if their parents cannot afford them.

Betty: Do you ever feel the pressure to have new clothes?

Angela: Not really! I used to, I guess it is like a stage like in middle school and freshman phase but once you grow up who cares what you wear!

Betty: You think you have grown up?

Angela (laughs): Yeah! No I still like nice clothes but I don't feel like I need nice clothes all the time or so badly. I can make do whatever I have at the moment.

Clothes are not only determinants of social acceptance and popularity, they are also signifiers of social class and position. Crane (2000) agrees that clothes are the most visible markers for social status. Bettis and Adams (2000) concluded that wearing mainstream clothing was a marker of popularity among teenage girls. Accordingly, mainstream popularity meant "going with the trends" or "being in style" (Pomerantz, 2008) – demands which both cost money. Indeed, clothing is a major concern for poor immigrant girls. In her study of immigrant and refugee girls in British Columbia, Canada, Wiseman (2004) concluded that poverty was a major factor for these girls as it inhibited them from acquiring "trendy" clothes and thus they could not fit in.

Zura echoed the above point by saying "everybody wants to be cool. Everybody wants to shop in a certain store like the mall and buy the same things as everybody else so that they won't feel excluded." "Cool" in this case refers to trendy, name brands, or tight-fitting clothes (Wiseman, 2004). Zura added, "Everybody wants to shop in stores like Hollister's, Abercrombie and such." Participants in my study agreed that even though everybody wanted clothes from Hollister and Abercrombie, not everyone could afford to shop in those stores. According to Zura

and Angela, girls go through phases in their desire to fit in by donning the "right" attire. Angela admitted feeling the pressure when she was younger but not so much in high school. She stated that she "still likes nice clothes" but does not feel like she "needs nice clothes all the time or so badly," and "can make do with whatever she has at the moment." Zura echoed the above point by stating:

> Well I had my moments when I wanted everything and I let this get to me. Like there was a point in time I wanted to wear ripped jeans but my parents won't let me buy them. I wanted them so badly. I can't wear shorts either to school and I can't even stay at home with. It has to be a certain length. Sometimes I feel like I want to go with shorts to school but I know they will stop me so I don't even bother to try. Like I have shorts but I won't wear them because of my parents. So now I don't buy them anymore because what is the point?

The above excerpt is an indication of the many contradictions in these girls' lives. All four participants insisted that they did not "care much" how they dressed for school. Zura, for instance, stated that she "pretty much wore anything as long as it was decent," but it is clear that, in a way, her dressing had been influenced by external forces. In her case, her parents served as the inhibitors of this influence. Still, as I mentioned earlier, there were occasions that I found Angela and Zura wearing the same type of clothes they had denounced and criticized.

Dhahabu also agreed that girls in her school often faced insurmountable pressure to look "pretty." She added, "They wear short dresses and put on a lot of makeup." Even though she denied it, Dhahabu's dressing underwent major transformation since she first arrived in the United States. Jiwani (2006) posits that the value and meaning appropriated to clothing is something immigrant girls can only develop gradually. This was true in Dhahabu's case. When I first met her, Dhahabu's daily attire generally consisted of a headscarf, long skirts and dark colored sweaters. In the three years that I have known her, she has gone from wearing modest, conservative dress to what is currently in mode with young women. It was typical to find

Dhahabu going to school in tight fitting jean pants, a sweatshirt or a tight fitting top. Dhahabu recognized that there is a lot of pressure for girls to dress "cool" but, like the other participants, she was reluctant to admit succumbing to the same pressures. She acknowledged changes in her dressing habits but justified her metamorphosis in a very interesting way. When I asked her what caused the transformation in dressing, she maintained that her dressing has not changed much except that she wears pants nowadays because of the cold Michigan weather. She further explained:

> No, like no, I never feel like I am under pressure to be like all the other girls. I do not care much about clothes. There are days like Homecoming where people are supposed to come with pretty dresses if they want, so I do sometimes. For me, I just think about what to wear in the last minute when I am about to leave for school because I sleep up to the last minute so I rarely think of what to wear. I wake up and get ready for school so there is no time to think about what to wear. I never feel like I envy these girls because I don't want to put pressure on my mother to buy me nice clothes like for these girls.

Like Angela and Zura, Dhahabu was also concerned about what the demand for new clothes will mean to her family economically and does not want to make unrealistic demands on her parents who she knew were struggling financially.

Belinda took a different perspective regarding clothes and fitting in. Unlike the other participants who agreed on the importance of trendy clothes as a signifier of acceptance, for Belinda, clothes were more of a marker of an individual's moral standing. During all our meetings, Belinda always came dressed in long skirts covering her up to her feet and always wore a long baggy sweater. Her modesty in clothing was especially evident during summer, as she would always wear dark-colored clothes and socks to cover her legs. Because of her Christian beliefs Belinda abhorred "cool" clothes. She considered this as "scant dressing." When it came to dressing, questionable morals were not limited to scant dressing, Belinda also disapproved of "women who wear pants." In this case, Belinda pointed to her pan-ethnic

identity to draw moral boundaries. She emphasized the difference in the upbringing between her African and African-American peers at school by claiming that Africans are "better behaved" and "more respectful," a point that I discuss in detail in Chapter 6. It is not surprising that, in this case, Belinda drew from her Christian upbringing to justify her perspective on an issue, as she claimed that her Christian beliefs influenced her views on everything. Below is the exchange that ensued when I prodded further on her views regarding women wearing pants:

> Betty: Why should women not wear pants?
>
> Belinda: I do not like to see women wearing pants! The Bible says that a woman should not put on men's clothes so I can't go like against the Bible because it says you can't subtract or add and I can't say I will design the kind of trouser I put on. It depends on everybody like what you believe in what the Bible says and it depends on everybody's desire. I just will not put on pants.
>
> Betty: How do you feel about your classmates who wear pants?
>
> Belinda: I don't like it but there are some people like you who put on pants but they look respectful than other people. Sometimes girls when they wear pants, they have their underwear showing on the outside. It is just not very decent. It's kind of different but I don't like say she is a bad person. It depends on tastes. Wearing pants does not always make you a bad person, but me I don't like. I don't wear a trouser or shorts because that is against what the Bible says.

Even though Belinda claims that she is not judgmental about girls who wear pants in her school, the above quote suggests she actually is and tries to distance herself from them. Belinda set such high moral standards for herself and others that I suspect this might have been an important factor in what I perceived as her alienation in school. At the same time, even though Belinda did not conform to normative ideals of dressing for youth, it does not mean she was not socially aware of their importance. She pointed out that "girls who dress stylishly and always make their hair in different styles everyday" are the most popular girls in school:

> You will see the popular girls in school; they put on fancy clothes, and do their hair every time. You never see them like other people who dress casual. You wouldn't be surprised ah! So even you dress like that. Every day they dress stylishly.

She maintained, however, that she did not interact at all with these girls because they "feel they are better than everybody else." Dhahabu reiterated Belinda's point on the differences between Africans' and African-Americans' way of dressing. She remarked that Africans were "more respectful" in their mode of dressing than African-Americans. Like Belinda, she was equally disturbed by the "inappropriate" clothes some girls wore to school. According to Dhahabu, inappropriate clothing included short shorts and dresses and any type of clothing that revealed undergarments such as bras and panties. According to Belinda, students did this deliberately because the school had clear policies on what to wear to school. Dhahabu agreed with Belinda by stating that her parents would never allow her to dress "inappropriately" like some of the girls at her school. She blamed the girls' parents and wondered "how parents can let their children come to school dressed in that way."

Participants emphasized their lack of interest for trendy and fashionable clothes. It was interesting that the girls denied succumbing to teenage pressure when it came to style and fashion, yet in all the scheduled and non-scheduled meetings with Angela, Dhahabu and Zura, I found them wearing what I observed other teenagers wearing. Like their American peers, the girls would be wearing tight fitting jeans, t-shirts and sweatshirts over the t-shirts. Over summer, it was typical to find Angela and Zura and in some cases Dhahabu wearing short skirts and spaghetti-strap tops. Participants insisted that wearing short shorts, popular attire for young girls and women during the summer season, was not acceptable for school. Interestingly, there were multiple times I found Angela and her younger sister in those very short shorts that they had spoken against in the interviews. In Zura's case, however, she claimed she had never worn short shorts, but only because her parents would not allow it. Again this seemed to be an indication of

Zura's desire to conform to dominant norms of dressing, which is a marker of popularity among girls in school.

Participants' accounts also suggested that students' attitudes toward schooling could be manifested through their dressing styles. For example, participants pointed to students who "don't care much about school'' because they "don't dress like people coming to school but like public people walking in the street." Participants admitted that sometimes they were surprised at how some girls dressed for school. For example, Belinda stated disapprovingly that "some of these girls, they do not dress as if they are not coming to learn!" In their view, it was important to be able to distinguish a "student" from the "public." In this regard, they explained the importance of school uniform policy that existed in their home countries. All four girls supported the idea of wearing uniforms to school. Angela expressed her views:

> I like school uniforms because there is a standard way to dress which makes everybody equal. It can be really stressful if you do not have like good clothes to come to school with.

Zura supports Angela's view by saying, "I like uniform because people are sometimes made fun of what they wear to school." These discussions hinted at nostalgia for school life that was less complicated because school uniforms were the standard. Accordingly, school uniforms not only ensured a form of "equality" among students as everybody was expected to wear the same kind of clothing, they also made it easier to differentiate between students and non-students or who Dhahabu and Belinda termed as the "public." Now I turn my attention to how these girls developed a sense of belonging at school, and how this influenced how they defined themselves.

Constructing identity through belonging

A big proportion of adolescents' life is spent in school. According to Cotterell (1996), a positive school environment helps determine the quality of experiences students have. Because

schools are communities, it is important that students view themselves as members of this community. It is also in school where youth form new identities. Cotterell (1996) explains that schools "are intimate places where youths construct identities, build a sense of self, read how society views them, develop the capacity to sustain relations and forge the skills to initiate change" (p. 219). Fine (2004) further explains that adolescent youth shape their actions according to how they are treated by adults and adult institutions, how they are viewed and treated by peers, and how they desire to view themselves. Not all forms of youth relationships have positive implications. Peer pressure, for instance, has been found to inhibit adolescents and youth from focusing on long-term goals (Cotterell, 1996). Researchers have found girls' friendships to be an integral part of their development and growth. Merten (1997) found that for the girls in her study?, popularity meant being recognized by peers and sought after for friendship. Therefore, it is important that we also understand what type of relationships young girls have in school and how and why they form these relationships. I now focus on how these girls positioned themselves in relation to their peers, who they interacted with and what sorts of interactions they had with their peers, who they aligned themselves with or not and the implications these had on the quality of their educational experiences.

Participants had a range of views regarding relationships and how they are formed. Belinda appeared to be the least preoccupied about belonging and fitting in. Belinda claimed that she did not have anybody in school that she could call a "close friend." According to Belinda, friendship can only be formed through common and mutual interest. Belinda asserted:

> I can make friends but it depends on what kind of person because everybody in relations there is something they have in common, something they share. Some other people share boyfriends or whatever stuff, may be some others are like neighbors at home and are childhood friends. There are different kinds of things that bind two people together and me I don't feel like I am bonding with anybody because this is the way I was even back home. I had like close friends but there was specific time that you meet them, like maybe

> schools stuff, may be it will be a long time before you saw that person but most of the time I used to spend time at home.

Like the other participants, Belinda was a devoted Christian who candidly professed her Christian faith. Unlike Dhahabu, Angela and Zura, whose accounts suggested that church might be a socializing space where they made friends, Belinda's faith appears to be more of an inhibiting factor in facilitating relations with her peers. Belinda shunned her peers at school who carried themselves in an "unchristian-like" manner by "drinking, taking drugs and using foul language." She emphasized her disapproval:

> Here most of the students are rude. Some the kind of behavior is different. Some have bad behaviors. Certain friends you find have some good character. But here most students smoke and drink and I do not do those kinds of stuff. They use bad language and they are sarcastic. Maybe they are friends because they share these things in common.

Rather than make friends at school, Belinda preferred to spend time with her large family, especially her three sisters. She claimed to "have more fun at home" with family who she shared common interests with. Belinda was always in a hurry to get home after school and saw no value in hanging around at the end of the school day except when she had an assignment that forced her to stay back. Neither does she participate in any extra-curricular activities which usually provide opportunities for developing friendships for youth in school. Unlike the other three girls, Belinda has younger siblings who she had to hurry home to take care of in the evening when her parents and older sisters all left for work. In addition to sharing mutual interests, Belinda believed that the duration of stay in the U.S. has an impact on how immigrants like her develop friendships. She believed that the longer you stay in the U. S., the easier it is to have friends. She referred to her current Math class and compared her present experiences to the previous year when she had just arrived in the country:

> This year in all my classes people are friendly to one another than last year's classes. It is different because last I year I was still new and it seems different to me. I did not know

> anybody because it was my first year but this year is my second so I am like used to it so it is like normal so like I have been here longer so I am used to it. I find people are friendlier. You can ask stuff. They can ask stuff from you. When I do not know the answer or I don't understand like may be if I did not get it. People relate with another well and are friendly to one another.

The above admission does not mean that she was willing to open up to making friends. On the contrary, Belinda insisted that even in this class, she still could not pinpoint anyone who was a close friend.

Belinda's peer at Diversity High, Dhahabu, in contrast, had many friends in school, though she did not have any American friends. Most of her friends were from Africa and Mexico. Specifically, she mentioned friends from Burma and other African countries including Burundi, Congo, Somali and Sudan. It makes sense that Dhahabu had friends from these countries because of their similar experiences prior to coming to the United States. Most of her friends were refugees who fled their home countries as a result of civil strife. In addition, they have the shared experience of living in refugee camps before they eventually relocated to the United States. Even though Dhahabu claimed that she had many friends, she did not speak much in classes where "there are more Whites." When asked why, she responded:

> I don't talk much in that class. If someone talks to me I will talk but if they don't ask me, I don't say anything. I just keep quiet in class. One day of my classmates asked me why I do not talk in class and I told her I don't have anything to say. It is not that I am afraid it is just that when I am in class with many White students I don't talk much. At least there is Japanese in the class so when I want to talk to him I call him quietly and ask him a question. He is the only one I talk to in that class.

Unlike the other participants who have American friends, Dhahabu is wary of American students. From her accounts, Dhahabu and other Burundian refugees at Diversity High were subjected to frequent bullying from their American peers. Dhahabu claimed she was consistently called names. Sometimes the bullying would escalate to threats of violence. The following excerpt illustrates her point:

> There are some people in school if you are just sitting somewhere minding your business they will come to you and ask you if you are from Africa. Then they tell you go back to Africa and they say you smell, and I don't know why because I shower every day. But we just used to say it is OK. If they say we are Black, me, I just respond yes, me, I'm Black from Africa. If you do not know English and if they say hi to you and you do not know anything and you don't reply, so they laugh at you all the time and then they say, "you don't know English" and "you are Black, go back to Africa."

In Dhahabu's case, interaction with peers was limited to school except for her Burundian friends. She did not interact with them outside of school, did not visit them and neither do they visit her at home. Like other immigrant communities, Burundians in her town are a close-knit community. They attend the same churches and frequently organize community events such as musical shows, religious events and fundraisers that have fostered a sense of community among the Burundians. Because of the alienation they face from their peers in school, for Burundian youth these events serve as social safety nets. Scholars including Portes and Rumbaut (2001) and Portes and Zhou (1993) contend that disadvantaged immigrant children who live within "ethnic enclaves" are provided with the necessary social networks thus shielding them from problems that are characteristic of their inner cities which they often time inhabit. Of the four participants, Dhahabu was the only one who talked about being bullied, yet she was still optimistic and positive about schooling. I believe that in Dhahabu's case, the supportive community and family served as a buffer to the isolation and harassment that she and her Burundian peers experienced in school.

Participants from Dynamo High School, on the other hand, had different experiences regarding friendships and belonging. Unlike their counterparts from Diversity High, Dynamo High students Angela and Zura had active social lives in school. They had many friends and were involved in different extra-curricular activities such as sports and clubs. Additionally, both girls stated that they had "friends from all over the world." Dynamo High is a relatively racially

and ethnically diverse school, even though as Angela and her colleague Zura described it as more "White." Its proximity to a large university has ensured diversity in terms of nationality. It is typical at the university for international students such as Angela's mother to enroll their children at Dynamo High. Zura described her group of friends in this way:

> I have friends from all the over the world. I have both Black and White friends but my best friend is Mexican. My parents they rarely let me go out so I just invite my friends. Or just watch TV and hang out or we go to the movies sometimes.

Angela described her friends below:

> I have friends from all over. I have American, Mexican and African friends. We just hang out go to the mall and stuff like that. Or like during lunch time at school. We usually visit one another. Sometimes we have like parties and sleepovers. I also have White, Black and Mexican guy friends but we really don't hang out with them outside of school. We never visit them and we never bring them home. I don't think my mother would like that.

Clearly having a diverse group of friends was important to both of these girls. Unlike Belinda, who shunned friendship, and Dhahabu, whose group of friends was limited to her Burundian peers, these two girls consciously sought out and were in positions to have racially and ethnically diverse friendships. When I asked Angela why diversity was important to her, she provided this detailed explanation:

> When you have diversity, you are open to all kinds of people I think. That way, if you see someone you will not be afraid to talk to them. I feel like that is the thing. I just feel like the schools I have been to, are diverse and this has made me more open towards people and when you go to other places you know what to expect and you can know how they all act. I don't think I would like it better if I was in a school that was not diverse, because if there is only one type of people and you don't fit in with them, then you will feel left out. If it is a Black school and you do not fit in with them, then you will feel left out.

Angela believed that the diverse setting in her school helped her fit in. However, fitting in had not always been easy for her. She admitted that it was difficult to make friends when she

first enrolled for school in the U.S. She stated that adjusting "academically was much easier than socially," because of her accent. She added that she was "worn out explaining herself over and over again" to her American peers. After a while she "just stopped talking" because she was tired of "repeating" herself. Angela had gotten rid of her accent and claimed that it was "easier to make friends now." Her circle of friends was "pretty diverse" and included a Mexican, Americans, a Tunisian girl, and a couple of African immigrant students.

Except for Belinda, the other three girls had similar views regarding friendships and belonging. Their accounts suggested that having friends was important to them even though how they went about accessing and developing these friendships depended on different situations. Dhahabu's limited English, among other factors, constrained her from accessing American friends. Instead, her circle of friends was limited to Burundians with whom she had shared experiences. On the other hand, Belinda's Christianity constricted her from having friends, and because friendship is based on mutual interests, she made no effort because other students did not share her interests. Her social network was limited to immediate family members with whom she had shared interests. Angela and Zura, on the other hand, had numerous friends from all over the world and had active social lives with these friends. They "hang out" and "do stuff" together, in and out of school. However, the degree to which these two girls related with friends is different, a point that I have already addressed. Zura's interaction with friends was more restricted than Angela. Angela was allowed to hang out more with friends. She went to the movies and to the mall, and had a Friday curfew of 11pm. While Zura was allowed to "hang out," her time was restricted to 6pm each day.

Cliques as markers of social standing

For young people, having a sense of belonging or being part of a group is an important part of growing up. Not only do these relations provide a sense of security but they also enhance self-confidence. Youth also construct their identity based on the peer groups they belong to. Cottrell (1996) asserts that because group affiliations are a source of status and reputation for adolescent youth, they play a big role in their personality development. Therefore, in order to fully understand how these girls navigated the terrain of girlhood, I have to address the girls' understanding of the social groups that existed in their schools and how they positioned themselves relative to these groups. In this section, I focus on participants' understanding of the structure of these groups, how they are formed, their comprehension of the guiding norms and the distinguishing traits between the mentioned groups.

In the prior sections, I have made the argument that participants shared some views while differed on various aspects of schooling. I continue to make that argument here. Participants shared some views while they differed in relation to how peer groups were structured and maintained. It is interesting to note that in this case, participants from Dynamo High were more articulate in describing and labeling peer groups that exist in their school. Their descriptions of these groups matched description by scholars of peer culture. On the other hand, Belinda and Dhahabu were not as articulate in this regard. They could only describe the groups in their schools based on dressing and other visible attributes but could not label them. When asked how girls hang out in school, Belinda's limited knowledge of this was manifested in her statement:

> I don't know…there are different kinds of groups. Like there are those girls who are stylish and like to dress up, and there are those who don't care about stuff and then there are those who depend on their culture. Like there are all sorts of girls some you cannot even explain them.

In Belinda's view, there seemed to be three cliques of girls in her school, and she mainly distinguished them with their personal traits and manner of dressing. The exchange below ensued when I pressed for further explication:

> Betty: I hear you say there are those stylish girls, those who stick to their culture and those who do not care. Let's start with the stylish girls? How can you describe them?
>
> Belinda: You will see them they put on fancy clothes, do their hair every time like, they just look like different, I just don't know. Like you never see them like other people who dress casual. You wouldn't be surprised "Ah so even you dress like that" because they always want to look nice. They dress everyday stylishly.
>
> Betty: Do they dress expensively?
>
> Belinda: I don't know how to tell.
>
> Betty: How can you describe the girls who maintain their culture?
>
> Belinda: Like the Somalis, you never see them without the scarf. If in case they are wearing a short thing, there will be something inside. You see most of them with long skirts. I think they dress like this to maintain their culture. The girls who don't care, they color their hair green, purple, they wear like black stuff all the time. Some of them cut their trousers and wear chains. I don't know but most of them are White. Though there is one Black girl I see, she has almost like five different colors in her hair. You know there are many of them in school and I get surprised and I ask myself why they do these kinds of things.
>
> Betty: What makes you think that these kids don't care, especially this group?
>
> Belinda: Like when dressing and coming to school, you check yourself. Am I dressed in a way that when someone sees me they will say that kid is a school kid who is going to school to learn or she is just like a public person? They just take you like they don't care the way they dress.

On the other hand, Zura had this to say when asked the same question:

> There are a lot of cliques in school. There are the jocks who want to do sports but mainly football. For girls there are the preppies, and then there is a small group of ghetto girls. Then there is like the nerds but there are also different kinds of nerds. There are the stupid nerds those who do not want to do anything about school and there are the ones who are smart and want to do well in school. Then there is also the druggies, all they want to do is drugs. They stick with each other. Then there is like the badass girls who think they are cool.

Zura could both describe and label the cliques that existed in her school. She could even relate this to academic achievement when she distinguished the nerds who are "smart" and those who are "stupid."

While using different labels, Angela confirmed the existence of these groups when asked a similar question:

> There are like three cliques. There is like the popular girls and then there is the middleclass and these are like the people who are in plays and they don't do sports as much. There are the jocks who do sports but they are boys. There are also the ghetto girls who are Blacks. Then there are the weirdoes or whatever and these are the Goth or Emo people. Then there is us, ordinary people like us. I really don't know where we fall.

They also shared similar views regarding inter- and intra-clique interactions. From their accounts, boundary blurring seemed pervasive in some of the groups. They agreed that while these groups rarely interacted with each other, some cliques interacted with certain groups. For instance, they reiterated that preppies interacted more with the middle/average group, but not so much with the ghetto girls or the weirdoes. It is worth noting, however, that while Angela and Zura differed on the number of cliques that existed in their school, they generally agreed on the descriptions of these groups. Participants' accounts revealed the two most visible peer groups that girls in their schools aligned themselves with, *preppies* and *ghetto* girls. They described preppies as the most popular girls at Dynamo High. They are mainly "White, rich, dress well and think they are better than others," stated Angela. She eloquently described preppies in the following excerpt:

> Preppies are those people that have been pretty much been in the same school all their lives. They have gone to the same middle school and they are mostly the rich people. They are mostly White. You can also tell from the way they dress and the way they act. They dress in brand names like Hollister and Abercrombie and stuff like that and they act like they know they are popular and they act like they are better than everybody else but they are really not. They talk to everybody but you can tell they feel like they are better than everybody else. Most of them are athletic, they do sports. The girls are called preppies but the guys are the jocks. The preppies there are like two groups, the Whites

> and the Blacks, but there are very few Black preppies. I only know of two Blacks who are preppy. All the other preppies are White.

Participants agreed that the clique "preppy" was more popular than other cliques. Preppies could be distinguished by their way of dressing, social class and even race. Participants' description of "preppies" aligns with peer culture scholars' descriptions. Pomerantz (2006) asserts that "preppy" is a symbolic social term whose meaning has shifted throughout history and mostly connotes "mainstream popularity" or "emphasized femininity." She further asserts, preppy subject position offer girls a specific social standing in school. According to Pomerantz (2006), it was not just that a girl was viewed as popular in school, because could be popular without being preppy, but rather that a girl was a particular kind of girl. A preppy, she adds, is a girl who looked good, sexy and wielded power within the heterosexual matrix of the school. Preppies, she argues, set normative standards for femininity against which all girls are measured (p. 179).

The two girls from Dynamo High consistently contrasted the preppies and the ghetto girls. While "preppies" were described as the ideal and popular girls, being "ghetto" on the other hand meant "acting out and having an attitude all the time." Angela described ghetto girls as follows:

> Ghetto girls are mostly Black. They are also very loud. They talk loud in class, in the hallway. If you happen to bump into them by mistake they will go like "Oh no you didn't!" And stuff like that. It's like they have an attitude all the time. Sometimes they are just goofing around and sometimes they are pretty serious.

In these two girls' descriptions of the two peer groups, it is also worth noting the intersectionality of girls' lives in school. In this case, race, gender, class and sexuality intersected in shaping these girls' schooling experiences. The preppies, for the most part, have been described as White, rich and popular with boys, while ghetto girls are mainly Black girls who are always angry. But while they could clearly articulate the various social groups, the girls were quick in denying

allegiance to any of the groups they described. When asked which of the groups they belonged to, they denied belonging to any but suggested that they might exhibit a range of attributes of some of the groups they named. In this regard, Angela stated:

> I guess I would be like in the middle clique, I don't know some people say I am weird. I know I am definitely not preppy or popular or whatever. I dress the way I want to dress, I talk to everyone or at least I try to. I socialize, I can also be a nerd because I am good at school and I am not that athletic but I do sports like the preppies.

Zura reiterated:

> I don't feel like I fit in any of the groups but if I had to choose any of these groups it would be the preppies. My friends are preppy and I hang out with them. I mean I guess the way I dress and talk to them and stuff like that. I wear flip-flops to school just like preppies. Sometimes I feel like a preppy but then I have days when I get mad and then I get a little ghetto, not too ghetto though. I just get mad sometimes for no reason.

This finding parallels Warikoo's (2010) study, where she compared how students in two diverse high schools in London and NewYork appropriated racial and ethnic meanings when it comes to social groups. Most of them saw themselves as transcending group boundaries. She found that even though they could name the different social groups, over a third of her respondents claimed they did not adhere to any of the social groups. As in Warikoo's study, these two girls, Angela and Zura, mainly appropriated racial meanings when describing social groups. For instance, preppies were regarded mainly as a White social group while ghetto girls were seen mainly as African-Americans.

Angela and Zura were more articulate in distinguishing peer groups in their school. They could describe, name and distinguish them from other cliques. However, they were reluctant to admit belonging to any of the groups. Rather they suggested that they shared a range of traits that included preppy and ghetto among others. On the other hand, Diversity High participants had a difficult time naming these cliques. They could describe them and even distinguish them from each other but could not name them. Navigating the terrain of schooling

was not just about relationships with fellow girls, these girls' accounts suggested that boys were just as important in the relationships they developed in school. Not surprising again, there was a spectrum of responses with regard to how they related to or viewed boys.

Relationship with boys and dating

Dating also stood out as a theme when discussing peer relations. Just like other aspects of schooling, participants differed in their opinion of the relationship with boys. They all stated however, that dating was common in both schools. Even though participants mainly referred to heterosexual dating, they pointed out that there were gay students in their schools. When asked how they distinguished couples in school, Angela responded, "You see a boy and girl walking together holding hands and sometimes even kissing even though it is not allowed." She stated, however, that girls interacted more with other girls than they did with boys. Dating was also mentioned in reference to conflict among girls at school. Zura pointed out that most fights in school were instigated by girls, and often time they fought over a boy. When asked how such a situation might arise she responded:

> They would be like probably talking to the same guy or they broke up with someone then they came and talked to the guy. Or just like I mean is about guys or if you give them attitudes or call them ugly, I don't know.

As in most cases, Belinda was the most conservative, while Angela was most open about dating, even though she claimed not to be currently dating. Her interaction with boys was limited to "hanging out" in school, since she did not interact with them outside of school. For Belinda, interacting with boys at any level was never to be condoned. According to Belinda, being a "good girl" meant having minimal interaction with boys. Just like in other aspects of her life, Belinda's perspective on dating was informed by her particular Christian upbringing. She viewed girls who freely mixed with boys as being "disrespectful" and "immoral." Some girls

dress "promiscuously to attract boys," she added. The following excerpt exemplifies Belinda's views on boy/girl relationships:

> I guess African girls are different and respectful because they don't behave like other girls. You do not see them hanging around boys all the time. You don't see them touching boys and playing with their bodies or doing stupid stuff with boys.

She does not wear pants and neither does she put on the trendy attire like other teenagers do to "look attractive to boys." Again, her dressing style might be a constricting factor in relating with boys.

Dhahabu was a bit flexible regarding her views of dating. To this effect she stated:

> I don't give boys my number. If they want to talk to me I tell them we should chat first on Facebook then I decided if I want to talk to them on the phone. But even after that I won't give out my number. If they insist I tell them to give me their numbers, I will call them then I call them, then with anonymous number.

In Zura's case, dating not only appeared to be a source of conflict with her parents, but it also demonstrated the gender differences in her family's upbringing of boys and girls. There was an indication that Zura could be dating even though she denied it when I asked her about it. She was frustrated with her father and claimed he treated her "unfairly" when it came to dating compared to her brother who is just one year older (a point addressed in Chapter 3). This was something that irked her very much, as she did not understand why the rules were different for her. Her mother agreed with her and tried to intervene on her behalf on several occasions, but her father did not relent. Zura vented out her frustration about her father:

> It makes me really mad. I don't know, they think that I cannot take care of myself. He keeps saying that I don't know what is good or bad but I believe I do know. I know what I should or shouldn't do. He says that all the time. Now when I want to go somewhere I just ask my mother. But even then he does not give in. He says I will do that when I am ready to get married or when I go to college. It is just so frustrating.

Zura's family reflected gender differences in the upbringing of immigrant children. In most immigrant families girls are much more constricted and controlled than boys (Lee, 2001; Waters,

1999). Zura's father, like many immigrant parents, was stricter with the girls than he was with the boys, even though Zura was already 18 and had an after-school job which forced her to stay out until late in the night.

Of the four participants, Angela appeared to be more open-minded about interacting with boys. She admitted she did not date but that she had "guy friends." She also confessed there were boys at school she "fancies." When asked how her mother felt about her and her sisters having boyfriends, she said:

> I don't think she allows it completely. She told us there is no dating till we accomplish all our dreams. She does not say it as much but she says it when the topic comes up. I have guy friends though and she seems not to have a problem with that because she knows we are just friends but I have never brought them to the house. She does not allow that. I hang out with them when everybody is there, like when there is a bunch of people. Like that rarely happens but I have a lot of guy friends.

Unlike other participants' parents, Angela's mother did not restrict her from socializing with boys. She added that her mother "completely trusts" her when it comes to boys. However, like other participants in the study, her interaction with boys was limited to school. Her mother, she claimed, did not allow her or her sister to bring boys over to the house. Socializing with boys in Angela's case was further constricted because boys "do not enjoy doing girlie stuff like hanging out at the mall," Angela added. However unlike other participants whose activities and movements were restricted by their parents, this did not seem to be the case with Angela. Her mother allowed her to "hang out" with her friends, both boys and girls. However, like other participants in the study Angela did have time restrictions. She could only stay out late on Friday night but had to be back home by 11pm.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have focused on various aspects of participants' lives at school. I particularly focused on the processes and practices that helped shape participants' identity. These

four girls often differed in the strategies they used to navigate school. The practices that they were engaged in included how they thought of and responded to ideal expectations regarding body image. Their conceptions of beauty and styles of dressing were pertinent in this case. Participants' relations with their peers similarly stood out in these accounts. Formation of peer groups was the main emphasis here. One significant commonality was the girls' views regarding body image. When asked to define beauty, all four girls stated that beauty was more than physical looks. Rather, they mainly associated beauty with one's perceptions of themselves, intelligence, and positive attitude. Still, they agreed that beautiful girls were more popular in school, even though popularity was regarded negatively. They used words such as proud, arrogant and snobbish to describe popular girls. Additionally, they all denied feeling the pressure to conform to peer expectations regarding beauty and dressing.

It was interesting to note that not only did their views diverge from each other in this respect, but for Angela, Dhahabu and Zura, their actions sometimes contradicted their own stated views. This was especially apparent in their accounts of dressing. For example, Angela, Zura and Dhahabu openly criticized girls who wore short dresses and wore make-up to school, yet on several occasions I found them exhibiting the same behaviors they had denounced. They admonished girls who wore too much make-up and wore "sexy" clothes to school yet there were occasions when they did exactly the same thing. While this never occurred in school, several times when I had a meeting with them I would find the three girls wearing make-up and sometimes they would be wearing short clothes.

In the same regard, conventional discourse on girls' lives for a long time defined girls as victims of mass culture and societal expectations (Pipher, 1994). Current studies in the field have shifted from this thought by emphasizing girls' agency. Participants' narratives confirmed this

perspective. Girls in the study recognized the pressures adolescent girls were under but were determined not to be influenced be these pressures, at least not consciously. Without being aware, however, with the exception of Belinda, they sometimes gave in, but often time, they resisted these pressures.

CHAPTER SIX

TO BE OR NOT TO BECOME AMERICAN: DRAWING SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES FOR RACIAL AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES

> *"Actors engaging with popular culture, political debates, or religious identities encounter multiple identities, forms of identifications, reified constructs of culture and traditions as well as structural relations of inequality."*
> Kathleen Hall *Lost in Translation: Sikh Youth as British citizens (2002, p. 5).*

When one of my committee members pointed out to me that African immigrants had the highest educational attainment amongst all groups in the Unites States (this was the case up to the 2000 census), I must admit I was surprised.[11] .

This chapter concerns identity and boundary work. According to Lamont & Fournier (1992), one of the significant challenges sociologists and anthropologists face today is trying to understand how social boundaries are made and the social consequences these have. According to Lamont & Fournier, symbolic boundaries specifically allow us to capture the dynamics of social relations. I begin this chapter with an epigraph that perfectly describes the experiences of my participants. The young women in this study drew on various identity markers, including

[11] Unlike Asians, who are celebrated as the "model" minorities, African immigrants' educational attainment is not widely discussed. Of course there are explanations for this "fact." First, the proportion of African immigrants compared to other immigrant groups is low. More important, however, is that many Africans who come to the U.S are self selected (at least before 2000), and many come for educational purposes. At the same time, like many people, while I was aware that many Africans in the U.S. have high levels of education, I was more cognizant of the educational situation of many more Africans who are not like me or others I frequently interact with. There are many immigrants from different nations in Africa who are struggling in school, and their educational and economic futures seem nothing but bleak. In my view, Africans in the U.S are a very complex immigrant group. As such, there are no easy explanations to describe their educational, social and economic situations. Indeed, my participants' accounts confirmed this. There is no question, however, that African immigrants have had an impact in shaping the American social landscape. Even politically, they can no longer be ignored. After all, the current president of the U.S has African roots. His father, an immigrant from Kenya, came to the U.S to pursue further studies, and then met the President's American mother.

race, religion, and ethnicity, to distinguish or sometimes compare themselves to their peers at school. In this regard, I specifically focus on three salient identity markers – race, ethnicity and nationality to demonstrate how these girls positioned themselves vis-à-vis their peers and how other people, including peers and teachers, positioned them. To do this, I begin with a reference to Waters' (1999) study of West Indian immigrants in New York. I found this study relevant in explicating national, racial and ethnic identities, which are an important focus of my analysis in this chapter. Like the West Indian immigrants in Waters study, participants in my study drew on symbolic boundaries to show distinctions between them and their peers, and they were especially keen on drawing distinctions between themselves and their African-American peers at school. I focused on boundary work as related to participants' race, ethnicity, and nationality to explain how these girls constructed their multiple identities and the meanings they appropriated for these three identity markers.

I begin by introducing these girls to show how they situationally identified themselves, based on the three salient markers. Next, I provide the background of African immigrants in the U.S. This is especially relevant given the history of African immigration, which has changed dramatically within the last forty years. Next, I map out the different forms of boundaries these girls drew. Boundary drawing in this sense was both situational and context-dependent. In this regard, participants appropriated different meanings to their racial, ethnic and national identities depending on their temporal-socio/spatial situations. Here I also explain how, why and when these girls constructed these forms of identities. From the girls' accounts, it was evident that the three identity markers in question meant different things at different times for them. While doing this, I focus on the notion of *becoming American,* an identity which was evidently important to all these four girls, but for different reasons.

Even though I focus on the girls' narratives about their current and past schooling experiences, this study is not a simple story of "before" and "after" immigration, because, as Waters (1999) asserted, the dynamics of *becoming American* have changed tremendously. *Becoming American* holds different meanings for White immigrants. According to Waters, the *straight-line assimilation* model which has been used to explicate the integration process of the earlier White European immigrants into this country does not fully capture the dynamics of Black immigrants. Indeed, for these four girls *becoming American* held different meanings, meanings which were informed not just by their current educational experiences but also their plans for the future. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of why this should be important to teachers and schools.

Identity work as situational and contextual

Studies of Black immigrants such as Rong & Brown (2001), Foster (2005) and Waters (1999) have established a relationship between Black immigrant self-perception and educational success. Sociologist Mary Waters offered an alternative model to the *straight-line assimilation* model to explain Black immigrants' integration process. According to Waters, the *straight-line assimilation* model assumes that choosing to become American for newly arrived immigrants automatically leads to financial prosperity and acceptance into mainstream America. She argues, however, that *becoming American* is more complex for Black immigrants. America, according to Waters, is a contradictory place for these immigrants (p. 79). It is not only offers "greater opportunities" than their native homelands, but it is also a place where they experience "racial stigma and discrimination" (p. 79). Waters contends that as immigrants arrive in their new environments, they must not only decide how they will identify themselves but the people in the host society must also decide how to identify the new arrivals. This is because the "identities

these immigrants choose to adopt or are assigned" have huge implications for both communities (p.45). In her study of West Indian immigrants in New York, Waters (1999) concluded that to cope with the discrimination they faced in their new surroundings, some of them chose to identify with their pan-ethnic identity (Caribbean) or national identity, such as Haitian or Jamaican, rather than their racial (Black) identity. She found that the ways in which West Indian immigrants identified had implications not just for their academic but also for their life outcomes. She suggested that for these immigrants, choosing to identify oneself racially as African-Americans often times resulted in low academic achievement and lower social mobility, while those who chose to identify with their ethnic identity reaped greater educational and financial rewards.

With this in mind, I wanted to find out if my participants exhibited the same characteristics regarding their ethnic, national and racial identities as the Caribbeans in Waters' study. Did they identify more with their racial, pan-ethnic, ethnic or national identity? If so, did they do this for the same or different reasons as the Caribbean immigrants? In their very informative review of literature on the influence of race and ethnic identity on academic achievement, Wariakoo & Carter (2009) identified a strand of literature that suggested that students who stick to their racial and ethnic identities and still embrace the dominant culture fare better in school. I was curious to find out whether this was the case for my participants.

While participants' accounts confirmed the above finding, their accounts similarly suggested some ambivalence towards each of the above identities. This ambivalence shifted based on the girls' social and cultural contexts. Holland (1998) argues that identity is both historically situated and socially enacted. For the most part, these girls felt positively about their ethnic and national identities, yet in the end they all stated that they could give them up for

becoming American. Still, they gave different explanations for their reasoning. For these girls, *becoming American* was shaped by their future goals – goals that included education and career.

In the African setting, "ethnic" and even "national" identities connote different meanings. This became apparent in participants' accounts. Ethnicity and nationality played poignant roles in the girls' identity construction processes. A case in point is Belinda. She was born in the war-ravaged nation of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo or the DRC). When she was a toddler, her family moved to Zambia, her mother's native country, and they lived there before they eventually moved to the United States two and half years before my study commenced. Belinda's identity formation, like that of the other three participants, echoes Rodriguez' (2000) notion of *plural personalities.* Rodriguez asserts that, because identity is both relational and situational, each self is enacted according to the situation at play. Naturally Belinda considered herself Zairian/Congolese, but she also saw herself as Zambian. She explained:

> I consider myself both Congolese and Zambian because I am half-half. I belong to both because my dad is Congolese and my mum is Zambian. I have two different nationalities. If I go to Congo I am Congolese, if I go to Zambia I am Zambian. So it depends. I was born in Congo and I lived in Zambia until I was 17. That's where I grew up started my Kindergarten. So yes!

At the same time, she felt quite strongly about her paternal and maternal ethnicities which are Luba and Ushi respectively, both of which are marginalized tribal groups in the DRC and Zambia.

Surprisingly, Belinda also considered herself American……at least she knew that she was on the path towards her American citizenship in the near future. She said, "if I stay here in America for so long, then I will get the nationality for here, and they will consider me an American." Belinda also viewed herself as an African and a Black woman. Her identity construction is not only a complex process but also very intriguing. She positioned herself with

all these social identities but similarly held ambivalent views regarding all of them. Sometimes she viewed herself as Zairian/Congolese because she was born in Zaire/Congo and her father is Congolese, but she also explained that she knew nothing about the country where she was born because she was just a toddler when her family relocated. It was not surprising then that Belinda subscribed to African traditional norms where children are expected to identify with the father and was reluctant to identify solely as Zambian even though she lived in Zambia for a long time.

Zura's identification process was as contradictory as it was intriguing. It was worth noting that even though she had lived in the U.S the longest compared to the other four girls, she was also the most passionate about her ethnic and national identity. She had lived in the U.S for over a decade now and had even gained American citizenship, yet she identified herself first as Sudanese and Nuba. Unlike the other three girls, who were ambivalent about their ethnic and national identities, Zura was very clear and wanted people to know the salience of these identities in her life. Zura's passion was evident both discursively and materially. Zura informed me that at times she went to school in Sudanese attire just to make a statement about her Sudanese roots. In addition, her family had made it a point to attend annual Nuba cultural meetings, a point which I revisit later in the chapter. According to Zura, these annual events take place in different states and their goals were mainly to interact with other Sudanese and to showcase Nuba culture and traditions to the world. Since she began attending these events at the age of 12, Zura claimed she had only missed one of the meetings, when she went back to Sudan to visit for the first time since relocating to the U.S. Participating in these events was manifestation of hers and her family's beliefs about their ethnic background.

One possible explanation for why Zura was more ethnically aware and vocal than the other three girls could be because she had lived in the U.S longer and as a result might have been

more aware of the racial discrimination faced by Blacks in this society. Mossakowski (2003) contends that because ethnic identity creates a sense of belonging and positive group identity, it serves as a coping mechanism for Black immigrants, thus shielding them from perceived racial discrimination.

On the other hand, it was also worth noting that of the four girls, Zura was the one who mentioned a relatively high number of incidences in which she was mistaken as an African-American. Again, there could several explanations for this. Unlike her parents who spoke English with a deep accent, Zura spoke like an "American" and often dressed like a typical American teenager. She claimed that students at her school seemed surprised when they initially found out she was not American. I refer to these examples in Zura's case to demonstrate the complexity of her identity construction process. Indeed, the ways in which each of these girls engaged in their identity construction was very complex, and thus raised even more questions about identity construction of minority youth that I have only partly addressed in this dissertation. For instance, I wondered why the girl who had lived here the longest identified more with her ethnicity and nationality relative to the other three who had lived here for shorter periods.

Angela's case was equally riveting. Of the four girls, she was the least in tune with either of the three identity markers in question. There appeared to important reasons for this, though. It was not that Angela is not proud like the other girls of her ethnic or national identity, but these identity markers did not play an important role in her future plans. Angela was a high achiever in school. She hoped to attend a "good" college after high school but recognized that this dream might not materialize because of her family's limited resources. She understood that she might not be able to afford college because of the high tuition fees charged for international students (a

point I addressed in Chapter Three). Angela wished she could become American to benefit from the numerous financial resources that are uniquely accessible to American citizens. Of the four girls, Angela exemplified situational boundary drawing. The salience of the three identities in her case thus depended on both spatial and temporal factors. For example, in sports, teachers drew on her national identity as a Kenyan because they wanted her to join the marathon team. Similarly, in an incident that occurred in one of her history classes, her beliefs about her African identity became apparent when she admonished two of her African-American classmates whom she felt denigrated Africans (I discuss these in detail later in this chapter).

How Dhahabu chose to identify herself was just as complex. While she acknowledged both, she claimed neither her Burundian nor her Tanzanian heritage. She identified herself as an African because people easily recognized her African root. Dhahabu chose to identify as an African, rather than attempt to explain her complicated background. It is worth noting that not once during the interview did Dhahabu mention her ethnic roots. Given that she was a refugee fleeing from the Burundian civil war between the Hutus and Tutsi's, I expected her to identify herself with one of the ethnic groups, but she never did. Even though she was born in a camp in Tanzania and had never been to Burundi, her native country, Dhahabu and her family still spoke Kirundi at home. I believe that Dhahabu preferred to identify as an African to detract people from focusing on her past life, which could have had some painful experiences.

Given the above complexities, I wanted to explore what these experiences meant for participants in the context of schooling. For African immigrants, there are multiple levels of identity that influence their schooling. Basher Ali (2006) contends that because of their perceived differences with their mainstream American peers, newly arrived immigrant students often strive to reinvent themselves to be accepted. While I found this to be true of my

participants, as I will explain later in the chapter, identity construction is more complex than reinventing one-self. Like Woon Kwok (1996), I view identity as a relational concept that implies a "relationship between one group and an 'other,' whether real or imagined, whether clearly specified or not" (p. 4). According to Lamont (1992), identity is not just "culturally constructed but is also bounded by cultural repertoires to which people have access and the structural context in which they live in" (p. 171). Participants emphasized the differences between themselves and their African-American peers, but they still recognized the common denominator between them, which was their *race*. It is important to note that while on many occasions the identities these girls constructed were often time oppositional and reactionary to negative experiences, there were times when this was not the case. For instance, for Dhahabu and Zura, identifying as Africans emanated from the nostalgia of thinking about home. I was similarly curious to know how the girls self-identified and how other people's identifications of them influenced how they viewed themselves. Given the fact that in African settings there are strict cultural norms regarding gender, my goal was to explore how their day-to-day identities interacted in the U.S. with larger structures such as gender, and how these interactions ultimately shaped how they viewed themselves. Above all, I wanted to find out if these concerns shaped their view of education in any way.

Even though participants had a common pan-ethnic identity (their African identity), they appropriated different meanings for this. Vickerman (1999) posits that in the case of Caribbean immigrants, the decision to identify with their nationality or their pan-ethnic identity stem from their strong desire for upward mobility and the deeply embedded racial hierarchy that constrains black individuals in American society. In the same vein, Waters (1999) found that many Black immigrants like the Caribbeans choose to emphasize their ethnic (Caribbean) and/or national

(Haitian, Trinidadian etc) identity rather than their racial identity, which comes with the negative connotation of being Black in the U.S. Ironically, she adds, those who wanted to identify ethnically seem to struggle to form and maintain their identities in a society that defines them racially. I found this to be true of my participants as well. While they did consider themselves Black, they downplayed the importance of race in their day-to-day lives. Their accounts suggested that these views emanated from the negative perceptions of African Americans. It was important to them that people distinguished them from their African-American peers. For instance, Angela viewed African-Americans as "not smart," and Zura claimed that many of them "do not care much about school." I explore these points further in this chapter but first consider the significant issue of the context of African immigration.

Context of African immigration

Falola & Afolabi (2008) assert that when African immigrants establish footholds in the informal economy, they are playing out a very old story that has been seen ever since immigrants started coming to the United States. Like other immigrants to the United States, African immigrants move to this country for a variety of social and political reasons. They come to seek better economic opportunities, to escape from political turmoil, and to seek refuge from all manner of persecution from their native countries. According to Takougang & Tidjani, (2009), many Africans who came to the United States in the 1960s and 1970s were students interested in pursuing higher education rather than settling permanently. These students were attracted to American cities with large concentrations of institutions of higher learning, such as New York, Boston, Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Houston and Washington, D.C (Takougang & Tidjani, 2009). The few students who decided not to return to Africa after their studies settled mainly in the states and cities where they had attended college, which explains why cities such as

those mentioned above were the first to experience a substantial number of African immigrants. Although these cities remain magnets for African immigrants, the trend has shifted. African immigrants can now be found in many small towns and cities across the United States.

The U.S. Census Bureau showed that by the 1960's Africa-born immigrants consisted only of 0.4% of the total immigrant population, but rose to 3.7% in 2007. This number continues to rise. However, more than 75 percent of the Africans born in the United States arrived since 1990. A 2009 report by Aaron Terrazas of the Immigration Policy Institute stated that the number of African immigrants in the United States has grown 40-fold between 1990 and 2007. He adds that as of 2007, 44.0 percent of the 1.4 million Africans entered the country in 2000 or later, and 32.4 percent entered between 1990 and 1999. Terrazas adds that only 13.7 percent entered between 1980 and 1989, 6.9 percent between 1970 and 1979, and the remaining 3.0 percent prior to 1970. In the United States, Africans are concentrated in New York, California, Texas, Maryland, and Virginia.

Table 3. Total and African Foreign-Born Populations, 1960 to 2007

Year	Foreign born	Africa born	
		Share of all foreign born	Number
1960	9,738,091	0.4%	35,355
1970	9,619,302	0.8%	80,143
1980	14,079,906	1.4%	199,723
1990	19,797,316	1.8%	363,819
2000	31,107,889	2.8%	881,300
2007	38,059,555	3.7%	1,419,317

2007 data from the American Community Survey 2007, (Aaron Terrazas, Migration Policy Institute)

According to Falola & Afolabi (2008), the number of Africans entering the US annually is more than in the days of slavery. They cite different factors as facilitating the increased

immigration of Africans to the U.S. These include the Federal Immigration Laws such the 1965 Immigration Act, the 1980 immigration changes, the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act and the 1990 Immigration Act. In addition, pre 9-11 the U.S government relaxed immigration policies, making it easier for people from countries which were underrepresented demographically to settle here. They further contend that despite their minority status, especially with regards to numbers, African immigrants cannot be ignored because they have a big impact on the American political landscape and identity. African-born immigrants in the United States have made their mark in different areas, including "business, academy and scientific revolution" (p.1).

The 2000 U.S. Census also indicates that as of the late 1990's, Africa-born immigrants had the highest educational attainment of all groups, including immigrants and non-immigrants, (Terrazas, 2009). Based on the 2000 census, Terrazas (2009) reported that about two of every five African foreign-born adults had a bachelor's or higher degree. In addition, by 2007, 42.5 percent of the 1.1 million African-born adults age 25 and older had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 27.0 percent among the 31.6 million foreign-born adults. About one-quarter (25.2 percent) of African-born adults age 25 and older had some college education (less than a bachelor's degree) or an associate's degree, compared to 17.1 percent of all foreign-born adults. On the other end of the education continuum, about 11.3 percent of African immigrants had no high school diploma or the equivalent General Education Diploma (GED), compared to 31.9 percent among all foreign-born adults. About 21.1 percent of African-born adults had a high school diploma or GED compared to 24.0 percent among all foreign-born adults (Terrazas, 2009).

My study is based on the schooling experiences of a group of African immigrant girls attending schools in a small mid-western town. Unlike prior groups of African immigrants who came for schooling purposes and settled in the big cities, like Dallas, Chicago, Washington DC and New York, most recent African immigrants have settled in smaller cities such as the one in which this study took place. What does schooling mean for Africans attending school in a context where ethnic and national networks are not as established? In this regard, the role of context in shaping these girls' views of schooling became an important part of my analysis. I could not therefore ignore the fact that these girls might have different schooling and even life experiences compared to their peers whose families settled in bigger cities, where there are not only a larger number of African immigrants but these Africans are more established and thus might have had stronger social and even political networks. This did not mean that the girls in the study did not have social networks within their own ethnic or national communities; they did. In fact, my Burundian and Sudanese participants had strong social ties and were actively involved in various community events. Regardless, Burundian and Sudanese social networks in the focal city are quite different from well-established networks such as those of Nigerians in Texas or Ethiopians in Washington DC or Seattle.

Forms of boundaries: Defining racial, ethnic and national identities.

Waters (1999) notes that changes in technology and globalization have significantly changed the ways we view migration. She adds that recent immigrants, unlike past immigrants, do not make abrupt changes from one society to another as suggested in earlier assimilation models of immigration. That is, for new immigrants it is not a simple question of assimilating or not in the host culture. For a long time, it was argued that immigrant children do better in school when they maintain a strong ethnic identity and culture and resist American cultural and identity.

Waters explains that recent scholars of immigration have suggested that rather than relying on these "erroneous" models to explain migration dynamics, scholars should instead focus on "notions of transnationalism and Diaspora culture" to explain experiences of recent immigrants (p. 4). Participants' views of their ethnic, national and racial identities, for the most part, echoed Waters assertion. They made deliberate choices on whether to identify by ethnic or national identities. The choices they made, I argue, were in part influenced by their future goals, including their educational plans. These decisions not only shaped the ways in which they interacted with their peers and teachers, but also their perceptions of other Black students, including their African American peers. Their construction of their racial, ethnic and national identities also reflected their families' culture and values. In this sense, identities these girls constructed were both *situational* and *contextual*.

In trying to understand how West Indian immigrants coped with the contradiction between their self-identities and the identity imposed to them by outsiders, Waters concluded that West Indians, unlike native-born Blacks, have been successful in their new surroundings because they have a different attitude towards employment and the relationship with White Americans in general. The girls in my study viewed themselves as having different attitudes towards schooling as compared to African-Americans. Waters further claims that West-Indians' unique understanding and expectations of race relations allows them to interact with American racial structures successfully, unlike native-born Blacks.

Participants in my study were cognizant of the larger society's negative perceptions about Blacks in general, but rather than be combative, they chose to downplay and ignore these situations. For instance, Dhahabu and other Burundian students at her school experienced bullying at the hands of their peers, mainly African-Americans. According to Dhahabu, they

were accused of bad body odor and told to go back to where they came from - Africa, yet she was still optimistic about her peers and school in general. Dhahabu never had anything negative to say about her school, her teachers or her peers. Like participants in my study, Waters' West Indian participants distanced themselves away from Black-Americans and wanted other people to know they were not the same (p. 65). Participants described African-Americans as angry, loud, promiscuous and disrespectful compared to African-born immigrants.

Boundary drawing as situational and contextual

Lamont & Fournier (1992) suggest that meanings given to boundaries vary across class, race, and countries, depending on the cultural and structural contexts that shape the groups' lives. In Lamont's view, the location and meaning of particular boundaries are continuously negotiated, revised and revitalized, both by group members themselves and by outside observers. Thus, the identities these girls constructed were both fluid and situational. When asked how they identified themselves, they mentioned ethnic, national, and even racial attributes, but appropriated a range of meanings for these identities. For instance, they all acknowledged being Black but asserted that their national and ethnic identities were more important in comparison to their race. Belinda explained why she identified the way she did:

> I consider myself as an African but I am also Congolese and Zambian. I don't know. I would say I am half-half. I belong to both because my dad is Congolese and my mum is Zambian. I have two different nationalities. If I go to Congo, I am Congolese. If I go to Zambia, I am Zambian. So it depends. I was born in Congo and I lived in Zambia until I was 17. That's where I grew up, started my Kindergarten, so yes, I am Congolese and Zambian.

Dhahabu viewed herself in a similar way. She said she considered herself African but acknowledged her dual nationality. She explained herself saying:

> When I am at home I feel like I am African because the family reminds me of Africa because they bring all these memories for home but when I am in school when I am

> playing with other kids from other places I forget for a while that I am African but once I leave the playground I feel African again. And when people ask me where I am from, I say I am African but when they insist where I come from exactly, I answer them that I have come from Africa from a place called Tanzania. I consider myself African first but I tell them that my father and mother were born in Burundi but me and my sibling we were born in Tanzania. So I cannot say I am just Burundian or Tanzanian. But they don't get it so I have to explain more.

Waters (1999) asserts that Black immigrant identity not only changes over time but is situational as well as contextual. For Dhahabu, while her African identity was clearly her primary identity, she still acknowledged her Burundian and Tanzanian identities. Her relating primarily to her African self might have emanated from the *nostalgia* of thinking about her home back in Africa, but part of it might have been caused by the difficulty of explaining her complicated dual nationality. It might have been that many in the U.S do not understand these identities (Tanzanian and Burundian). Therefore, she found identifying in this way not very helpful or useful. Similarly, she drew symbolic boundaries regarding her multiple identities, in this case her pan-ethnic and ethnic identity. When asked where she was from, she was reluctant to identify herself with either of her two national identities. It was easier for her to refer to herself as an African than trying to explain why she was neither Tanzanian nor Burundian. Explaining why she chose to identify with her African rather than Burundian or Tanzanian identity, Dhahabu contended that "nobody will know whether I am Burundian or Tanzanian but for some reason they are able to tell I am from Africa." She went on to explain:

> You see if I say I am Burundian that does not make sense. There was a time I used to say I am Burundian. Every time someone will ask me "What?" I would say Burundian for a long time, but then they would ask me to tell them what we used to do in Burundi. Then I would be stuck. I wouldn't know what to say because I was not born there and has never been there in my whole life. So you see me I don't know anything. If you talk to my mum, and dad, they know but not me. So, if they ask me "Where do you come from?" I will say my dad and mum come from Burundi but me I come from Tanzania and if you ask me things from Tanzania where we used to stay, that I can tell you, but things from

> Burundi I cannot tell you because I don't know them. But I cannot still say I am Tanzanian also because that is not my country, we just moved there. So I prefer to say I am African than say I am Tanzanian or Burundian.

Belinda's situation was similar to Dhahabu's in many ways. Not only did she acknowledge her two national identities but also viewed her ethnicity as important. Belinda's father belonged to the Luba Tribe of Congo while her mother was from Ushi ethnic group in Zambia. Like Dhahabu, she acknowledged the complexity of her ethnic identity. In most cases, African traditional norms dictate that children identify with the paternal side of the family. These norms become particularly relevant in intercultural family settings such as Belinda's. She explained:

> You know African societies. Children belong to the father and so people just consider us Luba not Ushi. Sometimes they would see us as half Luba and half Ushi but most people see us as Luba.

For Belinda, her identity is not just about how she identified herself but also how other people identified her. In addition, both Belinda and Dhahabu had ambivalent views regarding their national identities. They acknowledged their dual nationalities, but still had mixed feelings about them.

Zura, on the other hand, was clear about her ethnic identity. When asked how she identified herself, she stated:

> I consider myself Nuba first because that's where my roots came from. That's where my family is from and I know when I go back, I will go back to Nuba, to my grandmother and grandfather. So yes, I do think of myself as African and Sudanese, but I am Nuba first.

At the same time, she felt a bit obligated towards her American identity. Because she had been in this country for almost a decade, Zura believed that she had become a bit Americanized. She admitted almost guiltily:

> I don't know. It's like I have been here for a long time so it's just like sometimes I feel I am American but I know I'm still African and I am still Nuba. I know people see me as an American but I try to like to express my African culture all the time to people.

While Dhahabu was nostalgic about Africa, Zura was specifically nostalgic about her native country, Sudan. Since she moved to the U.S, she had only visited Sudan once. That was two years ago. Tear swelled her eyes as she recounted her trip to Sudan:

> I was really excited. It was really fun. It was the first time I was going home since I came, so I was excited. You know going back, I did not have any expectations because I left when I was so young, so I did not have anything in mind. I couldn't remember what it looked like. Going back was amazing like I could never believe it. It just seemed like that is where I was born. It was amazing. It is not like America because that was my home. It was a good experience to go back home.

Ironically, despite her feelings about her native Sudan and her Nuba identity, Zura admitted that she would give up her Sudanese nationality to become American. She justified herself in the following manner:

> Zura: I can give up my Sudanese citizenship but I know I won't give it up inside. I would become an American citizen but I would still hold my Nuba culture in my heart.
>
> Betty: Is becoming American important to you then?
>
> Zura: No, it is not that it is important. It is just that it is better here and there are more opportunities to do things. It is not the same like in Sudan. Like women have more opportunities here in America. Like in Sudan they cannot become like doctors, or lawyers. Women can be anything they want in American unlike in Sudan.
>
> Betty: You think there are no women doctors in Sudan?
>
> Zura: I don't think so. I have never heard of a Sudanese female doctor. I don't know. Every time they talk about doctors in Sudan, I just hear about men. So I don't know. That is why I think there are only men. I don't know. I just think there are more opportunities for women in America than Sudan. It is not that girls don't go to school. When I went back, I saw girls going to school. It's just that they can't get into good jobs like being a doctor or a lawyer.

There was no question that Zura was proud of both of her Sudanese and Nuba identities. Those were her primary identities. Zura's identity construction was shaped both politically and

culturally. As a Sudanese woman, she was concerned about the plight of women in Sudan, which she deemed unfair and unprogressive. The dire condition of women in her native Sudan was not the only issue that bothered Zura; she was equally disturbed by the plight of Southern Sudanese people who have suffered from immense political turmoil for over two decades. Nuba people are part of the Southern Sudanese ethnic groups that were involved in the infamous Sudanese conflict. Even though she was not fully conversant with the intricacies of the Sudanese civil war, she was aware of the consequences the war has had on her Nuba people. Zura became very emotional when she spoke of her "people" back in Sudan who were "still suffering." In the following exchange Zura displayed her anger towards the atrocities which she believed have been committed against her "people" by the Arab-led government:

> Betty: Are you planning on going to Sudan when you are done with school?
>
> Zura: No, I don't think I want to go there permanently. I think I will stay here but I want to visit home once in a while. I don't think I will stay here forever though I want to go see my family back home. If I could like bring all my family here and leave Sudan for good, I would do it. It's just my family that makes me think of Sudan. I don't think if my family came here to the U.S I would ever go back to Sudan.
>
> Betty: Why not?
>
> Zura: Because of the government and everything that they do to the Nuba people. It makes me mad. The government is light-skinned people and they treat the dark-skinned people different because they think they are better. I am just going to leave Sudan to them and bring my family here.
>
> Betty: Is the discrimination still going on back there in Sudan?
>
> Zura: Yes and my family go through this every day because we are dark-skinned.
>
> Betty: What do they go through?

> Zura: Like the government will just come and tear their houses down and tells them to move somewhere else because they want that property. I know many families that have been killed too.

Even though Zura loved her native Sudan and identifies primarily as Nuba, the discrimination her ethnic group had faced and continued to face had negatively affected her views about her country. Her only tie to Sudan was through some of her family members who remained behind and continued to languish under the present regime. In Dhahabu's and Zura's case, the nostalgia about home reinforced their beliefs about their ethnicity. For Zura, however, it can also be concluded that her awareness of the atrocities suffered by her people back home had also reinforced a sense of pride about her ethnic roots. In addition, her family's involvement in the U.S Sudanese networks might have given her more opportunity to learn and understand about "her people," and thus strengthened her Sudanese and Nuban identity.

In Angela's case, she identified more as an African than as Kenyan. Ironically, she still diminished the meaning of her African identity by stating:

> I am proud to be African and I see myself as an African but it is not a big deal. It only means that I am from Africa. I just feel like someone who is from Russia is Russian then someone who is from Africa is African, that's it. I think my African identity is very important to me but it doesn't make me feel like I'm more special than anybody else because I'm African.

Unlike Zura, who identified primarily with her ethnic and national roots, Angela diminished her Kenyan identity in the following manner:

> I know I'm Kenyan yes, and when people ask me what part of Africa I come from, I tell them Kenya but I rarely think about this. I don't think it's any different from anyone who is from Zimbabwe or whatever. I have become Americanized a little bit.

Regardless, Angela preferred being identified as an African. Angela did not identify as African because of African nostalgia as Dhahabu and Zura do, rather she thought of Africa as distinct from the U.S.

She was also very defensive of her African identity to the point of becoming confrontational about it. This became evident in an incident that occurred in her social studies class when two of her African American classmates were asked to volunteer to play the part of Africans but hesitated, questioning why they had to play the role of Africans. She narrated the incident:

> One day in class we were learning about world serve and we were learning how Africa was colonized and the teacher picked up two Black boys from class and them told they were the Africans and then they were like "Why do I have to be African?" Then I was like "What is wrong with being African?" There is nothing wrong with being African. So I guess people think it is a bad thing to be African I don't know.

As stated earlier, Angela and the other three girls were very adamant in drawing distinctions between themselves and their African American peers, yet they questioned when their African-American peers did the same to them. Similarly, Angela related her African identity to her academic ability. She believed that her African identity played an important role in her performance. She claimed that it helped her stay "focused." She explained:

> I try to do my best in school and being African I think is a big part of that and probably if I was African-American I wouldn't be as smart. Maybe I wouldn't care as much. It is not that I think that they are, I just think if I was an African-American I wouldn't be as smart or care as much or I wouldn't think school was as important. I just feel like in Africa some people don't go to school. They don't have the same opportunities like I have, so I am here so I should take advantage of the opportunities. So I don't take these opportunities for granted.

Angela believed that her African identity helped her take seriously and value and hence excel in school. Like Zura, she drew on what she perceived as limited opportunities for women

in her home country. For the two girls, Africa represented not just fewer opportunities for women but also limited resources for personal advancement. How they identified in this case was contingent on how they perceived the opportunities available for them to excel in the future.

Even though the four girls appropriated different meanings for their national and ethnic identities, they were consistent in their views regarding racial identity. They acknowledged being Black and used biological explanations to justify their position. Here is what Zura had to say about being Black:

> I don't think being Black means much to me. For me being Black is just a skin color. Like I don't think about being Black like I think about being Nubian or Sudanese. It's just a skin color to me. When I hear Black it is usually Black American which I am not. I am African so I don't consider myself Black American. It is just my skin. I am proud to be Black but that's about it and I stand up for Black people.

Angela similarly stated:

> I consider myself as Black because obviously I am Black. My skin color says I am Black. I am not African-American though, but I am African. It's not really like an issue or anything, so it's not an issue at all.

Both girls in this case emphasized their "blackness" and insisted that it was not something that preoccupied them. They considered themselves Blacks simply because of the color of their skin which was similar to native Blacks or African-Americans. By diminishing the importance of their Black identity, they wanted to distinguish themselves from native Blacks. As such, they associated Black identity more with African-Americans. Waters (1999) asserts that in American society, race serves as the dominant distinguishing social identity in the case of Black people, and most Americans tend to see race and ethnicity as interchangeable. According to Waters, Black ethnics are usually defined by the society in terms of their master status, their race. As such, in the case of Black immigrants, *becoming American* for West Indians has a deeper and a more "negative" connotation – "they just don't become Americans, they become Black

Americans." This could be a possible explanation as to why these girls diminished their racial identity.

Becoming American

Standard models of assimilation relate *becoming American* to social and economic mobility. In other words, the more people become assimilated, the more they become economically successful. According to Waters, contemporary explanations of immigrant experiences, on the other hand, show that the social capital new immigrants bring with them and how they self-identify in relation to White Americans are linked together to create a situation where "*becoming American* and achieving economic success is decoupled. These assumptions posit that those who resist becoming American do better economically and academically while those who give up their immigrant identity become "downwardly mobile" (p. 5)

What did *becoming American* mean for these four girls? Becoming American was equally important to all the four girls but they offered different reasons as to why they wanted to become Americans. From the girls' accounts, to become or not to become American meant constructing a political identity. For Dhahabu, she wanted to be identified as an African but recognized that as an immigrant of refugee status, at some point she would have to give up her African identity if she wanted to be an American citizen. Like Zura, Dhahabu had family back in Tanzania who she would have liked to see regularly and she believed she could only do this if she became an American. Still, she was conflicted on whether to totally abandon her Tanzanian/Burundian nationality and wished she could maintain both. The following exchange ensued when I asked why it was important to her to maintain ties with Tanzania or Burundi:

> Betty: Why do you want to go back home?
>
> Dhahabu: Because I have brothers, uncles who are still in Tanzania. I want to be going for sometime there and coming back here. I just need to be able to go back and forth

between Tanzania and the U.S. I miss people back home and would want to see them as much as I can in the future. I hear there is an exam you have to sit for if you want to be an American. I am thinking if God helps me I will sit for that exam so that I can be both African and American. I can go to Tanzania whenever I want and also come back to the US whenever I want.

Betty: So you do not want to go back permanently?

Dhahabu: I don't know what plans God has for me. If I go back to Africa and remain, there is no problem but if I get used to the States like I am now used to when I go to Africa, I know I will miss people here then I will want to come back.

Angela also believes she had become Americanized "to some degree." When I asked her to explain what she meant by "Americanized," she replied, "well, people tell me I have become Americanized. Probably the way I talk. I also never used to spend a lot time on the computer like I do now. I think Americans spend a lot of time on the computer." It was interesting to note that all the girls except for Belinda acknowledged and recognized becoming Americanized. On the other hand, being Americanized had different meanings for them. Angela embraced rather than made excuses for "becoming Americanized". In fact she thought it is inevitable "if you have been in this country for a while." Participants defined *becoming American* by manner of speech, gaining freedom and liberty to travel back forth from one country to another, and dependence on technology. To become American for the girls meant giving up other identities, something which they were willing to do for their future plans to materialize. Still, these girls did not entirely give up their identities, especially given Zura's remarks about remaining Sudanese in her "heart."

Perceived differences with African-Americans

The literature on Black students often depicts them as a monolithic group. Few studies acknowledge the diversity and experiences of Black students (Foster, 2005; Rong & Brown, 2001; Waters, 1999). In his study of high achieving Black students in college, Foster (2005)

found that African-born Black students were more conscious of their ethnic identity, while the African-American students were more race-conscious. Using a cultural ecological framework, Foster concluded that African students regard African-American students as maladjusted and academic underachievers. Ironically, Foster found that African students still draw upon that same group as a resource for social networks as they navigate college. The four girls in this study displayed some of these tendencies towards their African-American peers. They drew symbolic boundaries when talking about their African American peers. They looked down upon them as being inferior academically and morally. They particularly drew on the differences in dressing styles, academic ability, and moral values to distinguish themselves and distance themselves from African-American peers. Both Foster (2005) and Waters (1999) have demonstrated that it is important, particularly for high achieving Africans and other Black immigrants, that people understand these differences.

While participants in the study took for granted and even dismissed their racial identity, this was not the case for their national or even ethnic identity. For instance, Zura exemplified other girls' views on being Black when she stated that she took her ethnic and national identity more seriously than her racial identity. Warriner (2007) poignantly stated that the distinction of "us" gains definition and meanings, relative to how we conceive of and construct discursively and materially 'them' (p. 345). Therefore, "exclusion" and "marginalization" are important aspects of drawing boundaries (p. 345). Participants in this regard wondered how some people mistook them for African-Americans. Zura and Angela admitted that they had been confused as African-Americans on several occasions. Given that they were adamant that people draw this distinction, I asked them how they felt when this happened. Zura responded, "I really do not care," but she still wondered about the confusion because the "differences should be obvious."

Belinda also believed there are differences between the two groups. In the following exchange, she tried to explain the difference between them and their African-America peers:

> Belinda: I think we are different from African-Americans. There is a difference you can just tell.
>
> Betty: So can you tell, what are some of these differences?
>
> Belinda: The life style, living style of dressing, even like the behavior. Somebody looks like at you and she will just say that she behaves differently from others. I just think they behave differently from us.
>
> Betty: What about life style, what do you mean life style? How different?
>
> Belinda: I know that most of us like immigrants from other different places, like most of the time we respect ourselves, like, because I see some other kids in here, mostly African-Americans, like touching each other, like those types of stuff. Us Africans we aren't allowed, like we don't do those things by our parents, like having boyfriends when you are still in school.

Belinda explained everything from a moral perspective, something which I have discussed in another chapter. It is not surprising that she drew such a moral boundary in explaining the difference between her and her African-American peers. In her opinion, African-Americans were not as well-behaved and as disciplined as the African immigrants in school. Dhahabu made the same point:

> African-Americans are different from us. I think from the way they dress and talk. Though not all of them are bad, there are some who are respectful and some are disrespectful. There are some who wear indecent clothes like short shorts and you can see their inside pants even though the school has warned us against doing this. The teachers said do not look at the people who breaking the rules by dressing badly. They told us to wear decent skirts and pants. There are others who you can see their bras. I don't understand why they dress like that. I can't ever see myself dress like that because I fear what my parents will tell me, but also I just can't see myself dressing like that.

Both Dhahabu and Belinda viewed these differences from a moral perspective. They pointed to differences in dressing style and behavior. They placed the blame on the parents of

these students whom they claimed had failed to instill moral values in their children. However, Angela and Zura used different attributes to distinguish themselves from their African-American peers. They argued that the major distinction between African-born students and African-Americans is temperament. African-Americans talk differently, are loud and have attitude all the time, the girls explained. In the following exchange Angela explained what she meant:

> Betty: How do you know someone is African-American?
>
> Angela: The way they talk and act. Like African Americans have like accents and their English is not most of the time perfect. It's not like….you know what I mean. Like you know how they talk. *Ain't, nothin*, I don't know. That's how they talk. It is not like straight up. Like they say *you is*.
>
> Betty: Is it only African Americans who speak like that?
>
> Angela: I think like a lot of time when you see someone talk like that it is a Black person. It's always an African-American.

Foster (2005) found African participants in his study to exhibit similar tendencies. He discovered that both African-Americans and African students often ignore some similarities and differences among them while "embracing others in order to privilege self conceptions that promote their academic strivings" (p. 35). In Angela's case, it was not that she was rejecting being Black. In fact she acknowledged it, but that was as far as she saw similarities between her and her African-American peers at school. She believed that her African identity distinguished her academically. She continued to explain the differences:

> It is not like only African-Americans who give the teachers a difficult time, but they will like be screaming at the teacher and do stuff like that and they would be like "No' I am not going to do what you are saying." They will be like, "Hell No!" "Blah blah blah" to the teacher and the teacher will tell them to go to the office. Some of them would care. Some of them do not because they will do the same thing again and get in trouble.

According to Angela, African American students were not the only trouble makers in school but she still viewed them as being the most difficult students. She also viewed them as not caring much about school.

Loudness was another characteristic used to draw distinctions between themselves and their African-American peers. Angela explained the point:

> Betty: You said earlier that you think Africans are different from African-Americans?
>
> Angela: Yes, I think there are differences. We don't talk the same. I don't I don't think we act the same either. I think African Americans are pretty loud. I don't think we are as much. I think Africans are pretty quiet. They would like express their feelings out loudly and we just kind of keep them in. I don't know. I just think so.

When asked to explain what she meant by loud, Angela replied:

> Angela: Like there will someone screaming all over the place. Like even I am sitting in the bus, I do not need to know your business, but someone is talking on the phone and they are like "yeah yeah" (she screams this out) and they are like screaming on the phone and you are like why do they have to do that? Why can't they talk in a low voice so that nobody else hears? You know like in school when the teacher asks them to do something, they would argue with them and scream at them and I am thinking, "Why are you trying to make a scene?" Yeah, and stuff like that.
>
> Betty: Is there any other situation showing that African Americans are loud?
>
> Angela: Yes, like in the hallways when they are talking to their friends, just everywhere they need to scream. And get into fights. I don't know.
>
> Betty: You think other people like White people don't talk loudly?
>
> Angela: No, they just talk regular. They don't scream all over the place.

Zura made the same point:

> Amongst Blacks we have the loud Black people and then the quiet Black people…..actually there are no quiet Black people. They are extra loud. They talk loud in class, in the hallway. If you happen to bump into them by mistake they will go like "oh no you didn't" (she says this wagging her finger and shaking her head back and forth,

> supposedly a character trait associated mainly with African-Americans). Like, they have an attitude all the time. Sometimes they are just goofing around and sometimes they are pretty serious.

Angela added that unlike among White students where popularity was measured by physical appearance a point that I have discussed in Chapter Five, a different yardstick was used to gauge popularity amongst African-Americans. She claimed that the "loud" African-Americans were the popular ones, a point which Zura agreed with. Belinda similarly characterized African-Americans as loud, even though she was more balanced and lenient in her depiction of African-Americans than the other three girls. She agreed that compared to other students in school, African-Americans were relatively loud but added that not all of them could be characterized as such. When asked what loud means, she responded, "Some people just like to shout unnecessarily in the hallway. Like when they are speaking to someone who is so far from them, or sometimes when insulting someone." Belinda added however, that this was not unique to African-Americans. It was something typical of many students at school.

They are just too "ghetto": Participants' view of African-Americans

I was also interested in the girls' use of the term "ghetto" when referring to their African American peers. Angela, Zura and Belinda tried to distinguish themselves from their African-American school mates by referring to them as "ghetto." Acting "ghetto" in these three girls' views entailed a range of traits. These included "being loud and obnoxious," "having an attitude all the time," "being disrespectful," and "not well-disciplined." According to the girls, ghetto people could also be distinguished by their style of dressing, which included "baggy pants and white t-shirts," "brand name sports shoes like Nikes," and "too much bling." African-American girls, they claimed, stood out from their peers because they wore too much jewelry, which participants referred to as "bling." Comparatively, Zura and Angela used the term "ghetto" more

often than Belinda and Dhahabu when describing African-American students. Zura explains the meaning of ghetto:

> Like there are different meanings for ghetto. Like there is like the poor ghetto and there is like Jews and stuff but there is also like the term that comes with attitude and you want to fight someone for no reason like African-Americans often do, or like just being crazy for no reason.

When prodded further, she continued to explain:

> I think everybody can be ghetto, because everybody can have an attitude and dress like that, but it also when one is poor, you can also be ghetto. Like if you do not have many things, something like that. Yeah, you have to be poor and act in a certain way. So mostly it is poor people who are ghetto. Most African-Americans I know are poor. That's why they are ghetto.

While ghetto was used by the girls in reference to African-Americans, they similarly used the word ghetto to explain a certain world view that is characterized through "attitude" and temperament. To this point, they claimed that "everybody can be ghetto." Additionally, ghetto from the above excerpt is not just about attitude but also about social class, where poverty is equated with ghetto. Thus, ghetto was an intersection of various attributes that included larger structures such race and social class, but also individual attributes such as temperament and attitude.

In describing the social groups that existed in their respective schools, Angela and Zura were more articulate and keen on drawing distinctions between various groups than Dhahabu and Belinda were. They particularly emphasized the distinctions between themselves and their African-American peers. In fact, while the two girls from Diversity High shared views on some of these differences, they were more lenient and regarded African-Americans less harshly than their counterparts from Dynamo High. In fact, they never brought up or even used the word "ghetto" when describing their African-American peers. Even when I asked specific questions

about this, they could not respond as articulately as Angela and Zura did. To prompt a discussion on this, I asked them if they had ghetto girls in their school, but they could not respond. When I explained the term based on the explanations given by the Angela and Zura, they seemed to understand the group of girls I was referring to. I was then able to have a more detailed conversation about social groups and their relationships, and their views of their African-American peers.

There are possible explanations for these differences. For one, Diversity High was much more racially diverse compared to Dynamo High. Similarly, the proportion of African-American students was also higher there than at Dynamo High. I believe this would have enhanced the chances of interacting with African-Americans and other minority students and as a result alleviate some of the stereotypes about these groups. According to Hewstone & Brown (1996), a multiethnic student body often leads to a less prejudicial schooling environment, and alleviates prior prejudice, consequently leading to equal status among the groups. Dhahabu and Belinda agreed that African-Americans could be loud but they did not attribute this trait only to African-Americans. There are loud people in all racial groups, they claimed.

On the other hand, Dynamo High was predominantly White, even though there were a number of students of color. It may be easy in this case to buy into the essentialized notions about minority students, because there were fewer chances for White students to interact with students of color. In addition, compared to the girls at Diversity High, both Angela and Zura were very savvy in their depictions of the cliques that existed in their school. They could explain and name the groups and even distinguish in terms of race, social class and academic ability. Much of the distinction, however, was based on racial and class stereotypes. For instance, the girls described the "preppy" girls as rich White girls who thought of themselves as superior to

others by "looking down on them." While they appropriated different meanings to the term "ghetto," they primarily used it to describe African-American boys and girls, whom they described as loud and arrogant.

Social class differences between the two schools could be another possible explanation. Dynamo High is situated in a more middle to upper middle-class setting, while Diversity High is located in a working-class area of the city. It might have been that Diversity High had a higher proportion of poor or working-class students, and thus more students from minority groups, than Dynamo High. Indeed, Angela and Zura confirmed that there was a higher proportion of White students in their school. Class divisions are more sharply drawn in an upper-middle class setting than one with a larger proportion of working-class students.

Teachers and peers as participants in boundary drawing

I wanted to understand if participants were aware or cognizant of their peers' and teachers' perceptions of them. From this perspective, boundary work was not just performed by the participants. From the girls' accounts, their teachers and peers were also actors in this process. Their accounts suggested that whether they were conscious of this or not, teachers and students at both schools used symbolic boundaries as they attempted to identify and define the four girls. Lamont & Fournier (2002) define symbolic boundaries as the conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices and time and space. In this sense, just like they drew distinctions between themselves and their African-America peers, both teachers and their peers drew symbolic boundaries to differentiate themselves from immigrant students, including my participants. For instance, in school participants were essentialized based on the little knowledge that their peers knew about their respective countries. They were surprised at their teachers' and peers' lack of knowledge about Africa. Even more surprising to

them was that many of their classmates had never heard of any of their native countries. Most of their American peers were more familiar with countries such as South Africa, which was at the time of the interview was preparing to host the World Cup. A few knew of Nigeria, again mainly based on negative stereotypes about Nigerians as conmen. They agreed, however, that most were curious to know where they came from and the reasons why they had migrated to the United States, as Belinda explained:

> They will like ask you where are you from so many times and I will tell them I am from Congo in Central Africa and most of them don't know Congo and they are like "What's that?" So I just tell them like South Africa is down but like Central Africa is in the middle of Africa, but they couldn't understand where Congo is.

Participants complained that even though many of their peers were usually polite when inquiring about their background, they still admitted that at some point it became bothersome. Countries such as Zambia, Tanzania or even the DRC were not familiar to their classmates, while some of them knew of Kenya, Burundi and Sudan. A majority of them were also aware of the Sudanese conflict and the Rwandan and Burundian genocides. In this regard, Zura and Dhahabu did not have difficulties explaining their respective countries. Still, it was frustrating for them that their colleagues only had negative information about their homelands.

At the same time, many of their teachers could make out where they were from and were familiar with the four countries. Unfortunately, like their students, they identified the girls with stereotypes or attributes that characterized their countries. For instance Angela was frustrated with her teachers who constantly "bugged" her to participate in the sprints. Angela's teachers were aware of Kenya's prowess in the long distance races and thus continuously pestered her to join the school athletics team. "It just does not make sense!" she exclaimed wearily. Angela's teachers assumed Angela must be a good athlete because Kenyans are known to be good marathon runners. Angela confessed to me her limited athletic ability, and she claimed she only

became involved in sports because it would give her an edge when applying for college and not because of her athletic ability. She vented her frustration:

> I *suck* at running. Just because I am Kenyan, I am expected to be a runner. Teachers keep pestering me to join athletics. You know like two days ago I went to the nurse's office and they were asking me where I was from and I was like Kenya. I do like short distance and Kenyan are supposed to be like good in long distance and so they were like have you tried long distance? Just because I am from Kenya they think I can run long distance but I was just like I have never tried it.

Dhahabu's classmates similarly performed boundary work. According to Lamont (1992), identity is bounded by the "cultural repertoires" to which people have access and the structural context in which they live. Language is an example of a distinction that can be used to form boundaries. In this regard, Dhahabu complained about the language barriers that her peers focused on. Even though that had since ceased, her peers constantly inquired where she came from when she first arrived in the U.S. She speculated that her "manner of talking" distinguished her as an African. She explained herself:

> Sometimes people can tell you are African by the way you talk. Like you can tell the difference when an American talks and when someone from Africa talks. People can tell most of the time where I am from even though some will still ask me, but many can tell I am from Africa.

Angela similarly contended that when she first started school, her classmates were curious about where she came from. She similarly claimed that this has since ceased, and she attributed this to the change in the way she spoke. Angela and Zura had both lost their heavy "African" accents and spoke with an "American" tone. On several occasions, they have been mistaken for African-Americans because "they speak like Americans." Angela admitted that she worked hard to get rid of her "African" accent because of the difficulties she faced in school before she lost her "African" accent. In the following exchange Angela explained how her accent might have mitigated opportunity for her to make friends:

Angela: I think for me it has really been easy education-wise. Socially it has not been as easy. In 7th grade I remember I did not have friends but in 8th grade I got one. In high school I got a lot more friends. When I first came it was difficult to make friends but nowadays I make friends easily.

Betty: What changed that you guys now have many friends?

Angela: I never really used to talk a lot when I first came. I used to be quiet the whole time in school then I come home. Then I got to talk more then I got more friends I guess.

Betty: I hear you say that you did not have many friends because you were not talking a lot when you first came.

Angela: Yes, I think so.

Betty: Why were you not talking much?

Angela: Probably because I was new and I did not want to talk a lot. I think they couldn't understand me because of my accent. I also thought my classmates might not understand me because every time I said something they were like "what?" So many times and after a while, I just said "Never mind. Just forget it," because I don't want to keep on repeating myself. After a while I just stopped trying and worked on my accent.

For Angela, her accent brought back painful memories of the period when she first began school in the U.S. She became aware that her accent was an inhibiting factor in making friends and developing relations with her peers. But rather than blaming her peers for the alienation, she decided to work on her accent by attempting to speak "more American," a feat in which she succeeded and which tremendously improved her social life at school.

From the girls' accounts, language was not the only factor that distinguished them from their peers. Style of dressing was equally significant in this regard. This was more evident with girls at Diversity High than at Dynamo. Dhahabu explained why she thought her African identity was apparent to everyone:

> You know when people look at me they can't tell if I am from Burundi or Tanzania but they can almost tell that I am from Africa. I think because of the way I dress. In school, other students always told us we dress like old people.

At the same time too, it was not only her peers who used dressing styles as markers of difference. Dhahabu also distinguished herself from some of her peers in this manner.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I drew on boundary work as explained by Lamont (1992), to explain how these girls self-identified and how they viewed and understood how others identified them in school. Most importantly, I addressed how boundary-making processes shaped the girls' educational and career aspirations. My work, like Lamont's, analyzed the meaning-making process by which we make boundaries between "us" and "them." When referring to their African-American peers, they often emphasized differences between them. The ways in which these four girls positioned themselves in terms of their race, national and ethnic identities offers insight into the identity construction of African immigrant students in the U.S. This is because, as Waters (1999) posits Black immigrants come from countries where they are a racial majority and never have to worry about their racial identity, but once they come arrive in the United States, they not only have to choose what kind of American they want to be, but also whether they want to be identified as non-immigrant Black Americans or as immigrants Blacks who maintain their ethnic identity reflecting their parental national origins.

These concerns have implications for Black immigrant students. This is because many Americans hold a monolithic view of Black students, not realizing that Black immigrants have different experiences from native Blacks. To this end, educators need to be aware of these nuances in order to effectively assist African immigrant children achieve their academic potential. They also need to understand how these students construct their "African" identity and

the implication this has for their educational inspirations and outcomes. Rong & Brown (2001) rightfully fault the assumption that all Black youth subscribe to the same racial identity, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, social class and other socio-cultural factors. There are intra-group differences amongst Black youth, they contend. Furthermore, educators should seek ways to approach Black children as a heterogeneous group rather than looking at them as a uniform group. Even though these four girls were all of African descent, they regarded their African identity in different ways based on their histories of immigration, family backgrounds and hopes for the future. Finally, on becoming American, the girls reiterated the importance of American citizenship but similarly had different meanings for this. Becoming American was an important plan for their future goals.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION FOR INQUIRY

In this study, I investigated the educational experiences of one of the least researched groups in the U.S – Africa-born immigrants. While there is much research on immigrant education, few of these studies have looked at how Black immigrants, particularly immigrants of African descent, experience school. Rong & Brown (2002) have concluded that the lack of research of Black immigrants, especially African immigrant girls, denies policy makers the opportunity to explore many urgent issues confronting this segment of the population. In the same vein, up until very recently, research on girls (who were the focus of this study) has mainly attended to White middle-class girls. While more still needs to be done, researchers of girls are now recognizing the experiences of populations which have historically been underrepresented in mainstream research. Weiler (2000) concluded that immigrant girls experience great changes in their new surroundings. Indeed as my accounts have demonstrated, such changes have "ruptured" the "traditional gender consciousness" leading to a "range of future expectations" (Weiler, 2000, p. 198) that sometimes align with but other times are in conflict with the new possibilities created by school.

By illuminating the nuances in these girls' educational experiences, my goal was to contribute to the discussion on how best to understand and thus determine immigrant girls' educational outcomes. To do this, I focused on multiple dimensions of their lives in school, including relationships with their peers and institutional agents, such as teachers and other school officials, their views of curriculum, and their knowledge of school procedures and policies while they were concomitantly trying to "balance and negotiate the competing demands of the

contemporary girlhood" (Jiwani et al, 2006, p. xiii). Ultimately, I attempted to discern how the above factors influenced the girls' views of academic achievement.

What then do the stories of these individual girls, or this set of girls, suggest? This chapter reviews and synthesizes my analyses and explores implications of the findings. I begin by revisiting the concept of girlhood and what it means in these contemporary times. In Chapter Five, I highlighted these girls' *agency* when explaining how they attempted to resist mainstream ideas about girlhood. Agency was not only evident in their experiences of girlhood; these girls' accounts similarly alert us of immigrant students' agency as they navigate the schooling terrain. Unlike most studies in the field, which mainly highlight challenges faced by immigrant students, this study provides a more complex picture of these students' schooling experiences. Despite the enormous influence of culture and structure in their lives, both as girls and as immigrants, these four girls were determined to chart their own destiny.

Next, I provide a summary of my key findings and discuss their implications for educational research and practice. I discuss the lessons I have learnt about achievement, importance of social and cultural capital, and how policies regarding non-mainstream children are enacted by schools. I also address the methodological contributions to educational research that this study offers. I conclude this chapter with thoughts about the historical significance of the time in which this study was conducted and how it shaped the girls' visions and conceptions of their future.

Exploring girlhood through an intersection lens

One of the implications of this study is its contribution to feminist theories. Issues of voice, power relations, context and identity were important to me as I presented the participants' accounts of their lived experiences. Focusing on intersectionality of these girls' lives ensured

that I stayed true to my goal of feminist research, which was to explore these girls' lives holistically while challenging the universal notion of girlhood experiences. Erkut, Field, Sing & Marx (2009) contend that the demographic profile of young women today poses critical challenges for researchers of adolescent girls. Erkut & colleagues (2009) argue that this challenge is not just theoretical, but also has "profound practical implications for policies and programs to promote gender equity for girls" (p. 407). Jiwani and colleagues (2006) similarly posit that in order to enrich our understanding of the complexity in girls' identities, their agency, their concerns and their social experiences, our conceptualizations of the girls' lives must be positioned at the intersections of race, gender and class, among other structures. Furthermore, assert Jiwani and her colleagues, "the experiences of being a girl are extrinsically tied to the multiplicity of social processes that intersect to shape girls' social contexts and identities" (p. 67). I focused on how the different facets of these girls' lives interacted and how this dialectical relationship shaped their views of school. According to Dill & Zambana (2009), intersectionality allows for marginal voices and lives to be acknowledged and recognized. Dill & Zambana summarize the goals of intersectionality as follows: 1) to incorporate many contradicting and overlapping life experiences; 2) to help us in rethinking curriculum and promoting institutional change; 3) to create a society where all voices are heard; and 4) to advocate policies that are inclusive of all voices (p. 3).

I sought to accomplish the above goals by highlighting three major facets of these girls' lives. I focused on the notions of academic achievement, identity and girlhood. Specifically, I addressed how social factors interacted in their lives as they navigated the terrain of school. AAUW (2002) reports that at adolescence, girls juggle many issues associated with this developmental period – trying to learn what the society expects from them while also developing

their own values. According to the AAUW report, this is a monumental task for girls, because they do this while negotiating conflicting messages about what it means to be female. Girls, the report states, "must prune and blossom, cope and strategize; they must invent themselves" (p. 243). These concerns are particularly grave for immigrant adolescent girls, who in addition to the problems associated with adolescence also have to do this while trying to adjust to their new contexts. We cannot also ignore the changes in the labor market, as this has serious implication on the identity formation of girls, especially immigrant girls. According to Weis (1990), "changes in women's employment and the greater economic independence along with concomitant changes in power relations within the family" (p. 19) has greatly impacted girls' lives. Some of these changes I highlighted in the study. Schools, families and the society in general need to embrace these changes and help girls develop their maximum capacity.

Summary of key findings

From their accounts of schooling, I chose to focus on three overarching themes. These included 1) their views of achievement and success; 2) notions of girlhood; and 3) boundary work as related to race, ethnicity and nationality. In the end, I argued that there is a possibility that these three key features influenced the ways in which they defined and positioned themselves at school. This, in turn, might have influenced the girls' attempts to access the institutional support and resources necessary for school success.

These girls defined academic achievement in a variety of ways. They frequently used the term *smart* when describing academic achievement, yet how they did this and the meaning they attached to the word *smart* was both varied and intriguing. Clearly, the girls' definitions of success, and their reference to mainstream U.S conventional indicators for success, varied in significant ways. Their conception of "smartness" was mainly influenced by personal

experiences and academic ability. Even though they all viewed GPA as a fundamental gauge of school success, they mentioned other aspects of schooling, including effort and motivation, as additional measures of school success. When asked to define a smart person using GPA, Angela, the highest achiever, gave a GPA of 3.75 and above as an indication of smartness. According to Zura, a GPA of 3.5 and above connotes smartness. Belinda argued that a 3.0 GPA defines a smart person. Unlike her peers who referred to GPA, Dhahabu referred to letter grades when asked to define smartness. According to Dhahabu, A's and B's were indicators for academic success. While this might appear to show lack of clarity on how the grading system works, imposing her own definition of success can also be interpreted as her attempt to resist mainstream school norms.

In trying to understand how these girls experienced school, I also focused on the notion of girlhood. While classic studies on girl culture, such as Mary Pipher's (1995) *Reviving Ophelia* and Peggy Orenstein's (1994) *Schoolgirls,* have had tremendous impact on the ways we currently understand girlhood, they did not necessarily take into account the diversity of girls' lives. Participants' accounts in this regard confirmed findings in the field about Black girls' view of their bodies. Indeed, these four girls were not as concerned or preoccupied with their bodies. They were confident in who they were. When asked to define beauty, they argued that it is not about the "physical" or "looks." Beauty, they claimed, "comes from within."

Another prominent feature of the girls' accounts was the notion of belonging and fitting in. Their descriptions of social groups in school were important in describing how the girls positioned themselves and how they positioned other girls in school. Given their patterns of socializing, it was not surprising that the girls' knowledge and understanding of peer groups in their school varied from each other. The young women from Dynamo High School clearly

discerned the various social groups and cliques in their school. They described and labeled them clearly. In contrast, the two girls from Diversity High were not as savvy in this respect. They could only describe the groups based on distinguishing markers such as clothing, behavior and sometimes race, but could not label them. While we cannot understand fully the causes or significance of these differences, they could demonstrate the two Diversity High girls' lack of understanding of school dynamics, dynamics which included how students relate with one another. Additionally, they may also have reflected the power of difference. These two schools are situated in two different contexts which produced different social groupings and cultures.

In the final data chapter, I focused on three salient identities of race, ethnicity and nationality. I focused on these three because they are not only "socially constructed" but are also "politically contested and pervasive in everyday lives" (Henry, 2010, p. 187). Participants enacted and appropriated a range of meanings to these three identities based on the situation and context they were in. For instance, while they acknowledged their racial identity, they clearly felt it was important that people distinguished them from their African-American peers. In this case, they drew both moral and intellectual boundaries to distinguish themselves from African-American students, whom they described as "promiscuous" "loud" and "low achievers." Distinctions were not limited to their African-American peers, they also pointed to differences with their White peers, particularly when describing the social groups that exist in their schools. This was evident when talking about the preppy clique, which they described as having "proud" girls. They also shared the sentiments that preppies think they are better than other students. At the same time, participants' accounts suggested that their teachers and peers also performed boundary work to define these four girls and other immigrant students in their schools. To this end, teachers and other students mainly drew on negative information and stereotypes related to

the girls' national identities. Finally, becoming American was important to all these girls, but for different reasons. Like the girls in Weiler (2000), these four girls valued education. Becoming American was an important vehicle to attaining not just their future educational goals but also realizing their career aspirations. Angela exemplified this point. As a foreign student, Angela claimed she would easily give up her national and ethnic identities to be an American in order to access the numerous educational resources that are accessible uniquely to American college students.

Understanding immigrant student identity and its implications for teaching and learning

Bartolome & Trueba (2000) contend that true democracy entails real commitment to educating immigrants and other minorities in this society. How do educators stay true to this commitment? They can address this by showing genuine care and concern for all children. Care in my view begins with the implementation of well-thought out school policies and procedures that can help newly arrived students adjust to their new environment. This did not seem to have been the case for Dhahabu and Belinda. Indeed, it is evident from these two girls' experiences that the lack of clarity in school policies can have dire implications in the educational outcomes of students coming from different educational settings. Students lose interest in school when they have experiences such as Belinda and Dhahabu had. For instance, Belinda stated that the school's decision to demote her grade level "for no apparent reason" "demoralized" and "upset" her. The ways in which their school handled these two girls' grade level placement when they first arrived in the U.S is an example of lack of concern.

Angela Valenzuela (1999) has written extensively about the notion of caring. She argues that for minority students (in this case, Latino students who are the focus of much of her

research) to succeed, the school has to show authentic care.[12] Valenzuela contends that when students feel alienated and isolated by teachers or through the curriculum, they get the message that the school does not care about them, and as result they disengage, leading to poor academic outcomes. Valenzuela argues that students who underperform are not against education but against school. She further concluded that students will care for the curriculum and school if they recognize that the teachers care about them. To care for children, according to Valenzuela, means having high expectations. Teachers should encourage non-mainstream students, especially those alienated as a result of their non-mainstream status, that they can achieve their maximum potential. Often times, teachers give up on students such as Dhahabu – English language learners (ELLs) or newly arrived students who are unfamiliar with the American educational system believing that the odds are too much against them and they therefore cannot succeed.

Participants' accounts suggested that having a sense of belonging is also important to students. In these girls' accounts, alienation was manifested in several ways. Belinda and Dhahabu did not engage in any kind of after-school activities, and neither did they interact much with their peers or teachers at school. Not having meaningful relationships with teachers and peers meant that the two girls lacked the opportunity to develop cultural and social capital which are necessary for school success. On the other hand, Angela and Zura, who were very active and more successful academically, spoke of meaningful relationships with peers and teachers, were

[12] Valenzuela (1998, 1999) explains *authentic caring* as genuine concern for the students and that teaching is prioritizes relationship with students. It is about teachers understanding children's "subjective realities" through "engrossment with their welfare and emotional displacement" (p. 5). Valenzuela contrasted these with "aesthetic caring, which is more focused on rules, objectives, timelines, subject matter, in a technical fashion" and "objectifies students through a hierarchical conception of schooling" (p. 5).

engaged in different clubs and sports, and could not only articulate their future educational and career goals but also how to realistically achieve those goals.

Lessons learned about categories

The stories of Angela, Belinda, Dhahabu and Zura contribute to the discussion of how we categorize groups. These girls' stories similarly illustrate how these categorizations not only shape their schooling experiences but also their view of themselves. In this sense, their stories emphasize the argument that Black students are not a homogeneous group. While the study's participants defined themselves as Africans, they also defined themselves as students and as girls, and identified variously according to their national and ethnic identities. Despite some of the shared identities, there were many disparities in the ways in which they experienced school. This was manifested in their views of school and their academic outcomes. Furthermore, most Americans have a monolithic view of Black students. They assume that Black students have the same educational experiences – often times they dwell on achievement stereotypes that depict Black students as low achievers and resistant to education. From these four girls' accounts, it is clear that Black students in public schools are more than this. They are a diverse group with disparate educational experiences which can lead to differences in the ways they experience adolescence and girlhood, their academic outcomes, and ultimately their visions of the future.

By recognizing these differences, I do not mean that we should ignore their commonalities. Black and African students share some universal experiences which should not be downplayed or ignored. This was manifested in participants' accounts in various ways. For example, even though they did not name it and even downplayed it sometimes, I discerned some aspects of racism and discrimination from some of the incidences they shared about school. These included bullying instances through name calling, serious verbal assaults, and threats of

bodily harm. These examples attest to their shared experiences with other Black students. The point I wanted to emphasize here is that the schooling experiences of these four girls also depended on the type of the school they attended. The two schools, Diversity and Dynamo High offered very different experiences. Not only were the four girls different but their experiences were situationally affected. For instance, bullying appeared to be more of an issue for African students at Belinda's and Dhahabu's school than it was at Angela's and Zura's school. In addition, the fact that the two girls at Dynamo High could name and describe the peer groups at their school better than their counterparts from Diversity High suggests that Dynamo High is much more segregated than Diversity High. This is further evidence that the two schools produced different experiences for the four girls.

At the same time, however, I do not claim that the experiences of this group of girls can be generalized to all African girls' experiences in public high schools. Rather, it is my hope that the stories of these four young women will provide insights to educators as they develop strategies on how to best assist children living on the margins of the society, achieve academic success. Ultimately, I hope this can bridge the gap between these students and their mainstream counterparts who do well in school.

Strategies for school success: Lessons learned about cultural and social capital

This study also reminds us of the power of cultural and social capital. As I commenced my study, I did not begin with cultural and social capital as a frame. When I began the study, my main goal was to highlight how three salient identities (race, gender and ethnicity) shape African immigrant students' educational experiences, but as my analysis began, it became apparent that the relationships and networks that these girls developed in school seemed to have a bearing on how they navigated the school system. Cultural capital was particularly significant as it

informed the ways in which they attempted (or not) to access and develop these networks. Furthermore their ideas of school success were shaped not only by their knowledge of, but also how they used or tried to access the opportunities available for them to succeed in school. The findings suggested that the ways in which these girls positioned themselves supported but also constrained their access to both cultural and social capital. For instance, Zura and Angela, the two academically proficient students, were very involved within the mainstream life in their school. They participated in school activities, had friends - American and non-American, and they embraced many of the mainstream norms of schooling. The lack of social and cultural capital was manifested in the girls' accounts in various ways, particularly for the girls at Diversity High. They demonstrated limited knowledge in the ways the school operated. Dhahabu had no understanding of the graduation policy even though this had dire repercussion in her case. Through the career choices they articulated, it was also clear that the two girls lacked an understanding of the relationship between schooling and the labor market. Even though both were failing in Math, an important requisite for careers in banking, both wanted careers in that industry. In addition, while it is important to note that the two girls had alternative career paths in case banking does not materialize, there was a mismatch in their two plans.

I have argued that their social and cultural contexts influenced participants' access to the necessary resources that could lead to success in school. Angela, who was the most successful academically, understood how to successfully navigate the school system. She possessed the right cultural and social capital that supported her attempts to navigate school. More than the other three girls, Angela seemed to have bought into the dominant ideals of school success. She was active both in and out of school. She participated in extracurricular activities such as clubs and sports. She even led some of these clubs. It was also possible that Angela's mother, who

was a graduate student at the time of the study, played a pivotal role in helping her develop the necessary cultural capital. She not only advised and guided in schooling matters, but at times advocated for her at school when needed. On the other hand, Dhahabu, who was the least proficient academically in this study, exhibited limited knowledge of how the system works. She had no meaningful relationships with her peers or school officials except for the ESL staff, and even then, she was not sure if this person was a teacher or not, she simply called her a "helper." Neither did she have clarity on many school policies, even those which had direct bearing on her, such graduation policies. She also had parents, who of the four girls, seem the least able to interact with the school and make use of its resources.

From these differences, what we learn is that even while these girls were marginalized based on their immigration status, ethnicity, race and gender, they were not marginalized in the same ways, serving as further evidence that African girls are not a homogeneous group. Their marginal positions shifted depending on how they enacted or activated both social and cultural capital. Having accepted the dominant ideals of school success, Angela appeared to be moving from the periphery into the mainstream. She was successful academically, and had "friends from all over the world," and even though she did not interact much with her teachers, at least they were aware of and recognized her academic capabilities and treated her as a successful student. Yet even as a successful immigrant student, Angela still had concerns about the future. She was worried that her family's meager resources might hamper her chances of attending a competitive college once she graduates from high school. On the other hand, not possessing the right cultural and social capital hampered Dhahabu's chances of ever moving from the margins like Angela has; she was alienated from almost all aspects of schooling.

Finally, we see that the choices participants made regarding school were influenced by many factors, including their identities and their experiences of girlhood. For instance, Belinda remained on the fringes, mainly on her own volition. By deliberately alienating herself from the mainstream, she missed out on the cultural and social capital. It is not that she did not understand how the school system works. On the contrary, her accounts suggested that she had chosen to forego school success to maintain an important aspect of her life, her Christian faith. This impeded her from developing important networks with her peers, whom she considered "immoral" and "sinful."

As I explained earlier in this chapter, lack of resources might ensured that Angela, a high achieving student who followed the "rules of the book" regarding success in school and actually attained success, might end up like her peers who either deliberately chose not to conform or lacked an understanding of the normative ideals about schooling. This study also revealed the different forms of relationships immigrant girls engage in and why they engage in some relationships and not others. Whether with teachers or school officials, these relationships can serve as forms of social and cultural capital. In this regard, this study can inform teachers on the importance of building and maintaining meaningful relationships with non-mainstream students. Belinda and Dhahabu may not have been aware of the implications these relationships, or lack thereof, have on their schooling. If schools are to serve students such Belinda and Dhahabu well, teachers should go out of their way to help non-mainstream students understand the school procedures and policies.

Lessons about achievement and school success

This study illuminated the various ways in which these girls conceptualized achievement and success in school. In some ways, all four girls bought into the normative ideals about school

success, yet some more than others. For instance, they all defined achievement primarily through GPA. They cited other indicators such as attendance, engagement and participation in class, but also pointed to subjective indicators such as effort, staying on task, relating with people and discipline as essential for school success. In other words, success to the girls was not just about academics. This is an important point for educators to consider, especially in the education era where achievement and school success are mainly based on quantifiable measures such as GPA and standardized scores.

The way the girls defined academic achievement was also reflected by their performance and views of school. The highest achiever, Angela, readily embraced and invested heavily in the dominant views of school success. She knew and understood what it took to succeed in school. She was involved in extra-curricular activities such as clubs and sports, was enrolled in AP classes and took time to volunteer, while the "lowest" achiever Dhahabu did not partake in any of these activities. This did not mean however that Dhahabu regarded herself as a failure, certainly not. In fact, even at the crucial time when it was evident that she might have to drop out of school, she still held on to her future plans, which included education. She talked about college and a career in banking. Additionally, despite her "failure" in school, Dhahabu's identity as a student was very important to her. In the diversity toss activity, it turned out to be her most important identity.

It is noteworthy that two student with very disparate academic outcomes (one was a very high achiever and the other was struggling in school) considered their student identity very important. Many people might find this ironic and surprising, as most low achieving students are assumed not to take their student life very seriously. My findings suggest that even a student who is considered a low achiever, such as Dhahabu, can have plans for the future that include

education. These stories remind us not only of the power of achievement ideology as an idea but how fragile or limited it is as a reality.

Finally, in this study I argued against the dualistic lens that is often times used to describe immigrant students. According to Ngo (2010), these students are often time depicted either as failures or successful students. For instance, as the model minorities, Asian students are mainly regarded as successful, while Black students (immigrant and non-immigrant) are clustered together as failures based on the stereotypical views of African-American's school failure (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998). According to Rong & Brown (2001), there is a danger in assuming that the racial identity of all Black students is the same. As demonstrated by the experiences of participants in this study, Black students can be differentiated based on their "communities, country of origin and socio-cultural factors" (p. 541). Even studying only four girls, I found stark differences in their achievement and their understanding of processes that supported academic success. If they are to help Black students achieve, educators need to take into account this heterogeneity.

Rethinking research on immigrant education

There is no question about the value or importance of the quantitative work that has been conducted to explain immigrant students' educational outcomes. Studies such as Portes & Rumbaut (2001) and Zhou, Velasco, Fix & Cleswell (2000) have provided insights into these students' educational attainment. The studies have cited factors such cultural differences, including language and food, unfamiliarity with the American education system, and poverty, among other factors, as some of the challenges facing immigrant students in school. While we know how and why these factors affect immigrant students' lives, these studies have failed to capture the complexities that characterize immigrant students' lives. Their lives are not as linear

as the studies have described. There are too many intricacies that define these students' educational experiences, and these can best be captured by qualitative studies. As a qualitative study, my study was able to capture these nuances. In the study, I managed to reflect the multidimensional aspects of African immigrant girls in school. The narratives of these girls pointed to the confluence of structure, culture and individual agency in their lived realities.

As I stated earlier, this study not only confirmed prior studies' findings in the field, it also provided new insights about the educational experiences of immigrant students. According to Ngo (2010), dominant discourses on immigrant education describe immigrant students' experiences mainly using a binary lens. But immigrant students' schooling experiences cannot be described that simply. Like Ngo, I found that while participants' accounts echoed some of the findings in the field, they similarly added nuances on what it means to be an immigrant in America's public high schools. Indeed, my findings confirmed many of the challenges immigrant students go through as they navigate the school, but in the case of my participants, these challenges were not the highlights of their experiences. Rather, the four girls focused more on their positive experiences. At the same time, even though their narratives did not highlight the negative aspects of schooling, I am not diminishing the importance of the studies that have done so; after all, we have learnt a lot about immigrant students as a result of such findings. My point is that immigrant students' lives are not all negative.

Additionally, in describing these girls' live, I could not ignore their lived and material realities as young women and girls. Numerous researches have documented the challenges that women go through uniquely because of their gender. Yet, the experiences of young women and girls of color have not been adequately attended to. Research on girl culture has established that because of these unique experiences, we have to take into account the social contexts of the girls

we study. At the same time, while it has been established that girls' educational performance relative to the boys has improved over the last decade, it is not very clear how this improvement is reflected racially or ethnically. A focus on African girls' educational experiences will enhance our knowledge on how students from different racial and ethnic groups experience school.

I could not speak of these girls' subjectivities without reference to their "agentic capacities" (Jiwani et al., 2006, p. xiii). As the four girls constructed their identities, they displayed agency in distinct ways. Despite the pressures of contemporary girlhood and the challenges that accompany the adjustment process, these girls attempted to chart their own paths and overcome adversities in the best way they knew how, again leading to differential academic outcomes. The strength of recent studies of girl culture has been their inclusion of individual agency in explicating girls' experiences. This study extends this discussion, with reference to a group that is not often made a priority in educational research.

Optimism in my view was an important aspect of their agentic capacities. The girls in this study were for the most part happy about their school, their teachers and their peers. This does not mean that the girls did not face challenges in their school. They did. In fact, they mentioned a number of negative experiences, but chose not to highlight these as their overall experiences. Not only were they optimistic about school, their narratives suggested that they had a strong sense of themselves. Even though their confidence about their identity was displayed in a range of ways, they were confident in who they were as Africans, as students, and as girls. Even in the face of numerous adversities and pressures that face teenage girls, as discussed in this study, they still managed to stay true to themselves. While this study will contribute to the field with its focus on students' optimism for school, these girls' stories also powerfully remind

us that having a strong sense of self is not enough to achieve success or to have positive experiences in school.

In Addition, these three girls' experiences in part reflect the achievement gap as perceived in U. S education today. This makes it even more crucial that educators understand how students from different cultural contexts experience schooling. If the United States is to compete globally, then all children must succeed in school. To do this, research needs to be conducted to include multiple facets of these students' lives. It is my hope that this study can provide insights for educational policymakers on how to best to address challenges facing immigrant students in school.

Finally, while social class was not a focus of this study, it emerged as an important factor that shaped these girls' educational experiences. For instance, social class was apparent in the communities that these girls lived in and as result the schools they attended. Becoming American was also influenced in part by social class. Social class shaped the kind of American these four girls wanted to be, and their reasons for wanting to become American. This would be an important factor to consider in future studies about African immigrant girls' experiences in school.

Lessons learned about policy

The debate on how to best educate immigrant children is not new. This has been going on since the inception of the common school. These girls' accounts illuminate the confusion and inconsistency of the policies pertaining to newcomers in today's schools. I was surprised at how much inconsistency characterized how these policies are enacted. A case in point is the grade placement policies that I have already explained. What is worth noting is the contradictory and inconsistent ways in which school officials at Diversity High handled placement for Belinda and

Dhahabu when they first arrived in the United States. Recall that Belinda had just completed 10th grade when she came to the United States. Naturally, she thought she would be placed in 11th grade, given that she started school at the beginning of the school year. She was surprised when the school informed her that she had to repeat 10th grade. Her father attempted numerous times to intervene and convince the school to place her in 11th grade, but without success. When she inquired why, she was informed that she did not have enough credits to be placed in 10th grade even though Zambia, her native country, does not follow the credit system. Belinda complied because she "did not have a choice." She was still visibly upset when she talked about the incident. She complained bitterly:

> I know teaching is different in Africa but I come from an English speaking country, I did not understand why they made me redo a grade. When I came here because teaching and the way the subjects are taught is different and they said I need like 45 credits but in Africa we don't count like that in terms of credit so I got like confused. You cannot compare.

Dhahabu, on the other hand, was placed five grades higher than where she was in Tanzania. What is confusing about this is that the number of credits was not cited in this case; rather, age was used to justify the placement decision. According to Dhahabu, she was informed that her age required her to be in the 9th grade and not 4th where she was back in Tanzania. Even though she spoke no English and was not familiar with American high school curriculum, it is surprising that Dhahabu was promoted five grades higher. I cited these two instances to demonstrate inconsistencies regarding polices related to immigrant students. How are these children expected to catch up with their native peers, if schools cannot implement uniform procedures to address these children's needs? If educators care for these students and are genuinely concerned about their educational outcomes, then schools should develop appropriate policies that fit their needs. Notably, this was more of a problem with Belinda and Dhahabu than

Angela and Zura. Could this be a problem related to school structure? Or individual school organizational culture? While this might not necessarily be the case, it is worth noting that neither Angela nor Zura, both who attended Dynamo High, had problems regarding placement when they first arrived in the U. S. Both were placed in the appropriate grade levels, and their prior schooling back in their native country was taken into consideration.

Limitations of the research

This study relied primarily on interviewing as a method for collecting data. Seidman (2006) posits that interviewing is the best method for investigating lived experiences. Because the goal of the study was to illuminate how participants defined their learning environment, interviewing students was most effective in accomplishing this goal. On the other hand, I believe this study would have provided even deeper insights into the lives of these young women if I had also observed the students in classrooms. While I did do some observations, these were limited to out of school contexts and observations during interviews. An ethnographic study which combines participant observations in the class rooms together with in-depth phenomenological interviews would be more effective in gaining deeper insights into the lives of these four young women.

Second, by relying solely on the voices of the students, I did not access alternative perspectives which would have helped illuminate some aspects of schooling that these students were not conversant with. Teachers and school administrators would have been helpful in this regard. This became evident in Dhahabu's case, when she could not clearly articulate her school's graduation policy. A teacher or a school administrator would have been better placed to explicate this policy more comprehensively.

Finally, while generalizability was not the goal in this study, I still recognize that there might be questions about the choices I made about these particular participants. While four participants were appropriate for a small in depth study such as the one I conducted, I recognize that Africa has numerous countries and the experiences of four girls from four nations cannot be sufficient to tell the story of all African students. It would be desirable to follow up this study with quantitative studies, using larger samples of students and more African nations.

Conclusion: Coda

This study was conducted during a historically significant time in the United States. It was especially significant given the subject of discussion and the subjects under discussion – African immigrants. It had just been a year and a half since the first Black president was elected to lead this country. What was more significant that is worth noting is that the president is a son of an African immigrant from Kenya. In their accounts participants often referred to this fact, mostly when they talked about their future aspirations. As I stated earlier, despite some of the adversities they faced, these four girls were very hopeful about their future. Part of this optimism emanated from the fact that America had elected its first Black president. Their optimism was also as a result of their shared roots with the President. For some reason, it gave them hope for their future. Their general sentiment was that even though he did not directly impact their lives, Mr. Obama's presidency gave them confidence that they could accomplish all their goals despite adversities they faced in school.

There were other significant political events worth mentioning that were reflected on participants views and perspectives about schooling. One such event is the economic downturn that began in late 2009 and was still ongoing as I conducted this study. Participants were well aware of this event. After all, it was all over the news. This recession impacted participants in

various ways. Unlike other summers in the past, the summer I conducted the study was particularly challenging in terms of jobs, a situation which they blamed on the recession. All except Belinda were looking for summer jobs, and they complained of the dire job situation. After weeks of searching with not much success, the three girls asked me to put in a good word for them for babysitting jobs. In the end, it was only Zura who managed to find a job, and this happened towards the end of summer. For Angela, this summer was important for her to get a job because she "wants to start saving for college." For the girls, not finding a job was an indication that the economy was not doing well. When I asked them if they were worried about the future because of this, they all appeared optimistic. In fact, Angela had this to say about the economic situation:

> I am not so worried about the future. I think it will get better because we have a good president, who cares about people. I think this is just like a phase. There is only this one bad time. I think things will get better. It will go away soon.

I provide this to further demonstrate the different situations that affect students' lives. I could not ignore the historical and political contexts for this study. Having a president with African roots was a source of pride for them as Africans. Even though they acknowledged that it had no direct bearing on them, they claimed he gave them hope about future possibilities.

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