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## Giving Voice to African Immigrant Families: Perceptions of African Immigrant Families About Their Children's Experiences in U.S. Schools

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Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Doctorate of Education Program

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Giving Voice to African Immigrant Families:  
Perceptions of African Immigrant Families About Their Children's Experiences in U.S. Schools

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College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
in Transformational Leadership

Julie McCann, Ph.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative ethnography case study examined perceptions of African immigrant families as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. The primary research question that guided this study was, "What are African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. public schools?" This phenomenon was explored to uncover meanings African immigrant parents from Liberia attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. The focus was on hearing stories the children told their parents about their experiences in U.S. public schools. Nonprobability sampling method was used to recruit participants. Eight families from Liberia, West Africa, were randomly selected to participate in the study. Questionnaire, one-on-one, face-to-face, semistructured interviews, and focus group sessions were used to gather data from participants. The findings are based on a thematic analysis of the data. The findings are based on these categories: challenges reported involving teachers, challenges reported involving peers (fellow students), parents' responses and reactions, the schools' response to the reported experiences, and meanings parents attached to the reported experiences. The findings are divided into these subsections: sociocultural stressors encountered by African immigrant students, cultural conflicts between U.S. schools and African immigrant families, role parental involvement played in minimizing sociocultural stressors to help immigrant children succeed in U.S. schools, and educators' response to sociocultural stressors affecting African immigrant students. The study concludes with practical suggestions to enable African immigrant students adapt well in U.S. schools.

*Keywords:* barriers adjusting, social stressors, immigrant students, educational partnership, educational reforms, immigrant families, educational interventions.

## **Dedication**

With gratitude and love, to my parents.

Your steadfast faith in God coupled with your commitment  
to have your children (five boys, four girls) obtain quality education is amazing.

Dad and Mom, you are the best.

You gave beyond your means so we can become what we are today.

To all African immigrant families.

For motivating and encouraging your children to strive for excellence despite the challenges.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction to the Problem**

Since the 1990s, Africans have migrated to the United States (U.S.) in larger numbers to escape wars, constant conflicts, and poverty for a better life (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013). African immigrants have diverse cultures, values, religious beliefs, and expectations. African immigrants have in common high expectations for their children to succeed in U.S. schools (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013; Ford, 2012). African immigrants evaluate their success in the United States, mostly on the academic achievements of their children (Bryan & Morrison, 2014).

From 2000 to 2012, over 60,000 African immigrants annually entered the U.S. legally with the dream of having their children obtain quality education in U.S. schools (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013). However, upon arrival in the U.S., children of immigrants faced challenges in U.S. schools (Bryan & Morrison, 2014). Multiple sociocultural factors negatively affect the educational experiences of immigrant students (Ford, 2012). Multiple studies found teachers were more likely to have low expectations as it related to the academic ability of immigrant students than their non-Latino White students (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Culturally specific differences in values, behavior, beliefs, customs, attitudes, and traditions were factors leading teachers to have low expectations for immigrant students (Ford, 2012).

### **Background and Context of the Problem**

When African immigrant families migrate to the U.S., they link prospects for achieving the American dream to the educational success of their children. However, adjusting to the educational system in the U.S. is a challenge for African immigrant families (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013). Upon arrival in the U.S., the quest for quality education is undermined due to multiple sociocultural stressors that negatively affect the educational experiences of immigrant children

(Bryan & Morrison, 2014; Ford, 2012; Hibel & Jasper, 2012). African immigrant families were negatively affected more by sociocultural stressors because they have few options and financial resources available (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013; Ford, 2012; Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Yet, parents of African immigrant children have high expectations for their children to succeed in U.S. schools (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013; Ford, 2012). For African immigrant parents, the American dream is attainable when their children succeed in U.S. schools (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013).

The experiences of immigrant children in U.S. public schools sometimes conflict with the values and expectations the parents have for their children (Braganza & Lad, 2013). For example, males immigrant students are often identified and labeled as having behavioral problems and learning disabilities without considering sociocultural factors (Ford, 2012). The behavior problems for which students were labeled could be culturally acceptable behaviors different from that of the White teachers (Braganza & Lad, 2013). Because of cultural clash, teachers often made unwarranted referrals due to misunderstanding or insensitivity to cultural differences (Ford, 2012).

Challenges immigrant students face in U.S. public schools cannot be solved without input from their families and communities (Lowenhaupt, 2014). Yet there is an absence of the voices of African immigrants in U.S. public schools (Adair, 2014). This study gives voice to African immigrant families in U.S. public schools. This study examined the perceptions of African immigrant parents as it related to the experiences of their children in U.S. schools. The key question that drives this study was, “What are African immigrant families’ perceptions of their children’s experiences in U.S. schools?”

## **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

This study examined perceptions of African immigrant parents as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. The focus of this study was shaped and framed by social constructivism (Creswell, 2014). As a philosophical approach, social constructivism was introduced by John Dewey (1933/1988). Lev Vygotsky (1978) made social constructivism a major philosophical theory for teaching and learning (McLeod, 2019).

Dewey emphasized the importance of learning from real life experience (McLeod, 2019). When people learn from their lived experiences, they can make sense of their environment (Eggen & Kauchak, 2013). By learning from lived experiences, meanings are attached to the experiences (Berk, 2010). It is important to learn from lived experiences to enhance collaboration with others. Collaboration through active interactions with others will bring about context to lived experiences (McLeod, 2019).

Within the context and structure of social constructivism, people understand and attach meanings to their experiences as they interact with others (Creswell, 2014). One way to make meanings out of personal experiences is through reflection (Morrice, 2013). Experiences people have through socialization form the basis of their perceptions. Those perceptions, then lead to interpretations. The perceptions and interpretations developed unconsciously often lead to assumptions (Lundgren & Poell, 2016). As people reflect upon their assumptions, they can put their experiences in context. Reflecting upon assumptions is crucial to relating to others and dropping misleading perceptions (Morrice, 2013).

Perceptions can either hinder or enhance problem-solving skills. Within the context of social constructivism, better problem-solving skills are developed through interactions with people from different cultures and backgrounds (Glassman, 2001). Interacting with people of



different backgrounds and cultures can lead to providing proper assistance when needed (McLeod, 2019). Through the framework of social constructivism, this study has given African immigrant families an avenue to voice their perceptions about their children's experiences in U.S. schools. Uncovering the meaning African immigrant families attached to their lived experiences in U.S. schools is essential. Educators can be empowered to provide timely assistance to immigrant students (McLeod, 2019).

There are benefits for uncovering meanings African immigrant parents attached to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. Studies highlight African immigrants have significantly changed the demography in U.S. schools (Goodwin, 2017). One goal of the U.S. educational system is to create avenues for students of all backgrounds to succeed academically (Banks & Banks, 2019). Uncovering meanings African immigrants attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. schools would enhance the goal of academic success for all students.

African immigrant parents motivate their children to live purposefully. Purposeful living requires making sense of personal experiences by reflecting on the subconscious meaning schemes that drive your actions (Morrice, 2013). When people make sense of their meaning schemes, they are empowered to minimize negative factors and cleave to values that enhance productivity (Lundgren & Poell, 2016; Morrice, 2013). Purposeful living is not about accepting the opinions of others. Rather, purposeful living is about putting your lived experiences in context to minimize negative stressors (Morrice, 2013).

Uncovering meanings African immigrant families attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. schools can minimize academic disparities in U.S. schools. As people of different backgrounds engage and interact with each other, they can better understand and relate to the lived experiences of each other (Morrice, 2013). When educators understood the

sociocultural stressors faced by immigrant students, negative stressors were minimized, and academic disparity resulting from low expectations was eliminated (Adair, 2014; Banks & Banks, 2019; Morrice, 2013).

### **Statement of the Problem**

African immigrant families link prospects for achieving the American dream to the educational success of their children (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013). African immigrant parents have high expectations for their children to succeed in U.S. schools (Adair, 2017; Curry-Stevens et al., 2013). However, most immigrant students start at a disadvantage when they enrolled in U.S. public schools due to multiple sociocultural stressors. The sociocultural stressors are the complexity of adjusting to a new community, new schools, and for some, learning a new language, English (Ford, 2012; Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Adjusting to a new environment is even made difficult because of limited financial resources and opportunities (Hibel & Jasper, 2012).

African immigrant parents raise their children based on values sometimes opposite to their culture of origin (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014). The values of immigrant families often clash with the values of the new culture. In this new culture, immigrant children must assimilate for their education (Ford, 2012). Most immigrant parents view the new culture as promoting minimum parental control. This perception of the new culture causes immigrant parents to fear exerting authority and influence over their children (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Consequently, the values of the parents about accountability and academic achievements are not emphasized to their children, fearing getting into trouble with the U.S. government (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014).

Adjusting to the educational system in the U.S. can be a challenge for African immigrant children. Immigrant students are often identified and labeled as having behavioral problems and

learning disabilities without considering sociocultural factors (Ford, 2012). The behavior problems for which immigrant students are labeled could be culturally acceptable behaviors different from that of the White culture (Braganza & Lad, 2013). For example, in most immigrant cultures, it is acceptable and expected for children not to make eye contact with an authoritative figure, and not speak while an elder is speaking (Ford, 2012). Yet, when immigrant students display such culturally acceptable behavior, their new teachers might label the students as having behavioral and learning disabilities (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014). Because of cultural clash, teachers made unwarranted referrals due to misunderstanding or insensitivity to cultural differences (Ford, 2012). Due to sociocultural stressors, some immigrant students performed poorly academically (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014).

One factor contributing to poor academic achievement among children of immigrants was self-concept (Norris, 2014). Language barriers, acculturation, difficulties adapting to a new culture, racial biases, and discrimination were factors that affected how immigrant children valued themselves. Studies tied academic success or the lack thereof to self-concept. Racial stigma and stereotypes can affect a child's self-concept, leading to poor academic performance (Norris, 2014).

Studies have highlighted how some teachers demonstrated low expectations as it related to the academic ability and achievements of immigrant students (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Low expectations from teachers caused immigrant students to encounter substantial negative consequences as it related to placement in special education. Low expectations from teachers undermined the progress of immigrant students in U.S. public schools (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). While other immigrant groups have been extensively studied, African immigrants have received

little attention from researchers. This study gives voice to African immigrant families as it relates to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools.

The claim of this research is, African immigrant families need their voices in U.S. public schools. Challenges immigrant students face in U.S. schools cannot be solved without input from their families and communities (Lowenhaupt, 2014). Other immigrant groups have been given platforms through research to add their voices to their education in U.S. schools. However, the voices of African immigrants are absent in U.S. public schools (Adair, 2014). One way U.S. schools can give voice to African immigrant families is to uncover meanings the families attach to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. Therefore, this study solely focused on perspectives of African immigrant families as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study examined perceptions of African immigrant parents as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. The primary research question was, "What are African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. schools?" This phenomenon was explored to uncover meanings African immigrant parents attach to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. This study explored perceptions of African immigrant families because African immigrant parents have high expectations for their children to succeed in U.S. schools (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013; Hibel & Jasper, 2012; Ford, 2012). This dissertation is about exploring and making sense of the perceptions African immigrant parents have about their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. The focus was on hearing stories the children told their parents about their experiences in U.S. schools.

## **Research Questions**

The primary research question that guided this study was, “What are African immigrant families’ perceptions of their children’s experiences in U.S. schools?” To answer the primary research question, participants were asked four open-ended sub-questions to help capture meanings African immigrant parents attached to their children’s experiences in U.S. public schools.

### **Sub-questions**

1. What were African immigrant families initial reactions and responses to the experiences of their children in U.S. public schools?
2. How did African immigrant families support their children in U.S. public schools?
3. What are the meanings African immigrant families attached to their children’s experiences in U.S. public schools?
4. How did African immigrant families partner and collaborate with educators to empower their children to succeed in U.S. schools?

## **Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study**

African immigrant students can adapt and perform well academically in U.S. public schools. To help African immigrant students succeed, educators need to uncover, embrace, and incorporate into their teaching strategies, meanings African immigrant families attached to their lived experiences in U.S. public schools. By uncovering meanings African immigrants attached to their experiences in U.S. public schools, educators can connect in ways that empower students to perform above average academically.

Most often, attitudes, perceptions, and decisions are a result of childhood experiences. Through socialization, perceptions are formed. Those perceptions, then lead to interpretations.

Based on the interpretations, people learn and seek to solve problems (Morrice, 2013).

Uncovering meanings African immigrant families attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools is critical. The perceptions, and interpretations developed unconsciously, often lead to assumptions (Lundgren & Poell, 2016). When educators uncover meanings African immigrant families attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. schools, educators can reevaluate their assumptions about the ability of immigrant students to perform well academically.

The relevance of this study is to give voice to African immigrant families. African immigrants valued education and have high expectations for their children to succeed in U.S. schools (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013; Ford, 2012). Yet, immigrant students faced sociocultural stressors that sometimes led to low academic achievements (Goodwin, 2017). This study has the potential to bridge the gap between the expectations and aspirations of African immigrant families and the performance of their children in U.S. schools. The findings of this study are the voices of African immigrant families as it relates to the success of their children in U.S. public schools. This study has provided educators with critical insights. Reactions and responses of African immigrant parents to stories about their children's experiences in U.S. schools are now known. The study explained how African immigrant parents supported their children in U.S. schools. Educators can understand meanings African immigrant parents attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. Educators have been given insights into meanings and perceptions African immigrant parents attached to how their children are treated by teachers and peers.

This study is significant because it has the potential to enhance collaboration and partnership between educators and African immigrant families. Studies emphasized parental involvement in the education of their children led to high academic achievement (Tan, 2012).

Most immigrant parents work more than one job and cannot fit traditional parental involvement roles, like attending meetings and conferences at schools (Tan, 2012). However, these parents engaged their children at home and motivated them in various ways to succeed in school (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014). This study uncovered how African immigrant families engaged and motivated their children to succeed in U.S. public schools.

### **Nature of the Study**

This dissertation is a qualitative ethnographic case study about the experiences of African immigrant students from Liberia in U.S. public schools. There are two basic ethnographic research methods, critical ethnography and realist ethnography (Creswell, 2013). Both ethnographic approaches provide a deeper sense of meaning, that is, why people do what they do. The goal of ethnographic research is to share individual stories of the culture, or groups being studied (Creswell, 2013). As an ethnographic study, the focus was on the stories African immigrant families shared about their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. The study explored and uncovered meanings African immigrant families from Liberia attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. schools.

African immigrant families living in an urban area in the Pacific Northwest were the primary target population. There is a large concentration of African immigrant families living in the Pacific Northwest (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013). Eight families were randomly and conveniently selected to participate in this study. All the families originated from Liberia, West Africa. The children of the selected families attended schools in the same school district.

Nonprobability sampling was used to recruit participants. Nonprobability sampling was used because this research was exploratory (Creswell, 2013). Questionnaires, one-on-one, face-to-face, semistructured interviews, and focus group sessions were used to gather data from

participants. After randomly selecting names placed in a container, each family selected was contacted via telephone to participate in the study. None of the family selected to participate pulled out of the study.

### **Definition of Terms**

For clarity, conciseness, and flow of the narrative in this study, the following are keywords and phrases that need to be defined to give understanding to the context and relevancy of the study.

*African immigrants:* People from all regions of modern Africa who migrated to the U.S. for a better life (Clark, 2008).

*Community-based organization:* A public or private nonprofit organization that concentrate on the social welfare of a community and works to meet the needs of the community (Leroux, 2007).

*Focus group:* Collective conversations or group interviews with a specified or diverse group of people in a guided discussion (Barbour, 2008)

*Perceptions:* Assumptions formed and developed through social interactions, based upon personal or collective lived experiences (Lundgren & Poell, 2016).

*Socioeconomic stressors:* Social, environmental, and economic inequalities with adverse negative impacts on a person or group of people (Boylan et al., 2018).

### **Assumptions**

As an African immigrant researcher from Liberia, it was assumed, data collection would not be a challenge. It was assumed approval from Concordia University's Institutional Review Board (CU-IRB) would be received without difficulties. Another assumption was community-based organizations that cater to African immigrants in the Pacific Northwest, would be glad to



work with me during the research stage. One of the community-based organizations provided names, addresses, and contact information of African immigrant families from Liberia. It was also assumed participants would be excited to be part of this study. There is a large concentration of African immigrant families from Liberia living in an urban area in the Pacific Northwest (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013). Eight families were randomly selected to participate in this study. The assumption was the selected families would not drop out of the study. The study was intended to be a vehicle for expressing the voice of African immigrant families from Liberia who participated. It was assumed the families would be excited to share stories of their children.

### **Summary**

This qualitative ethnography case study focused on perceptions of African immigrant families as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. The focus of this study was shaped and framed by social constructivism. Within the context and structure of social constructivism, people understand and attach meanings to their experiences as they interact with others (Creswell, 2014). The key question that drives this study was, "What are African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. schools?" This dissertation explored perceptions African immigrant parents have about their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. The focus was on hearing stories the children told their parents about their experiences in U.S. schools.

This chapter provides the background and context of the study. The theoretical framework, statement of the problem, and purpose of the study are concisely explained. The research question, rationale, relevance, significance, and nature of the study are highlighted. This chapter concludes with assumptions made by the researcher about preparation for data collection.

This qualitative ethnography case study focusing on perceptions of African immigrant families as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. schools consists of five chapters. Chapter 2 is a literature review of challenges faced by immigrant students in U.S. schools. About 70 studies on the experiences and sociocultural stressors of immigrant students in the U.S. were reviewed. Chapter 2 discussed the conceptual framework that guided this qualitative ethnography case study. Besides the conceptual framework, research and methodological literatures are reviewed, including methodological issues. Research findings related to achievement gaps, sociocultural factors, school-based interventions, and learning environments of immigrant students, are highlighted. Chapter 2 concludes with a synthesis of research findings. Chapter 3 discussed the design choice along with a detailed explanation of how data were collected and analyzed. The purpose of the study, research questions, and research design are explained. Target populations, sampling methods, instrumentation, and data collections are discussed. Data analysis procedures, limitations of the research design, and ethical issues are discussed. In Chapter 4, a detailed explanation of methodology employed in conducting this study is given. Description of the sample is explained along with research methodology. Data sources and methods used to access and/or gather data are explained. Process for participant selection including sampling procedures and reasons are explained. Findings of the study are summarized and analyzed data presented in an organized manner to provide readers with detailed and synthesized findings. Chapter 5 is a discussion of the results of the data analysis, and a discussion of the results in relation to the literature. Limitations of the study are explained along with implications of the results for practice. Recommendations for further research are given. This study ends with practical suggestions to help African immigrants adapt and succeed in U.S. schools.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Multiple sociocultural factors negatively affected the educational experiences of immigrant students (Ford, 2012; Goodwin, 2017). The sociocultural factors were learning a new language, cultural value-based clashes, and having limited financial options and resources (Adair, 2014; Braganza & Lad, 2013; Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Difficulties adjusting to a new culture while encountering racial biases and discriminations were major sociocultural factors (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). These sociocultural factors often led to poor self-concept or the lack of self-concept (Norris, 2014). While some immigrant students adapted despite challenges, these sociocultural factors impeded the academic performance of some immigrant students (Goodwin, 2017).

Multiple studies found teachers had low expectations as it related to the academic abilities of immigrant students than their non-Latino White students (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Misconceptions and deeply rooted stereotypes were reasons teachers had low expectations about the academic abilities of immigrant students (Ford, 2012). Labeling immigrant students as having behavioral problems and learning disabilities also led teachers to have low expectations about the academic performance of immigrant students (Ford, 2012).

Culturally, there were specific differences in the values and behaviors of immigrant students and their non-Latino White peers (Ford, 2012). There were specific differences in the beliefs and attitudes of immigrant students and their teachers (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). These differences were factors that led educators to have low expectations for immigrant students (Ford, 2012). When educators understood the sociocultural factors that negatively affected

immigrant students, teachers were better prepared to properly engage and motivate students to succeed (Hibel & Jasper, 2012).

Educators are agents of change. In some studies, teachers had a positive impact when they understood the sociocultural stressors that led to low academic achievements among immigrant students (Ford, 2012; Hibel & Jasper, 2012). For example, hostility from peers in names calling, and making fun of appearances negatively affected the ability of immigrant students to focus (Ford, 2012). Language barriers negatively affected the performance of immigrant students. Educators who understood these sociocultural stressors did not exhibit low expectations for immigrant students. Instead, those educators used interventions that motivated immigrant students to be their best academically (Norris, 2014).

This literature review focuses on challenges encountered by immigrant students in U.S. public schools. For this literature review, possible keywords search terms and phrases for brainstorming were generated. Some of the search terms and phrases were social factors, barriers adjusting to U.S. schools, social stressors for immigrant students, and low expectations in school. Other search terms were sociocultural factors, interventions in school, educational leadership, and behavior referrals. More search terms included partnership in educational reforms, and immigrant families' role in educational interventions. After generating the keywords list based on keywords brainstorming, the following three keyword searches were created. Sociocultural factors and barriers to adjusting in U.S. schools; sociocultural stressors for immigrant students and low expectations in U.S. schools and sociocultural factors; interventions in schools and immigrant families' role in educational interventions.

The above keywords were used for subject searching in Google Scholar and Concordia University Online Library, using two educational databases. The databases used are ERIC, the

acronym for Education Resources Information Center, and ProQuest educational database. When “sociocultural factors and barriers to adjusting in U.S. schools” were used as subject searching, Concordia University Online Library returned 35,534 results with 6,978 as peer reviewed. ERIC database returned with 22,312 results; most were peer-reviewed. ProQuest database returned 5,466 results; most were peer-reviewed.

The scholarly articles selected for this literature review were peer-reviewed. Each article or study addressed different components of the issues of concern in this research. The broad topic of interest was “Giving voice to African immigrant parents: Perceptions of African immigrant families as it relates to their children’s experiences in U.S. schools.” The claim of this study is, the voices of African immigrant families need to be heard in U.S. schools. One way to give voice to African immigrant families is uncovering meanings they attached to their children’s experiences in U.S. schools.

Challenges immigrant students face in U.S. schools cannot be solved without input from their families and communities (Lowenhaupt, 2014). Yet, the voice of African immigrant is missing in U.S. schools. Researchers have not focused on African immigrants as they have done other immigrant groups (Goodwin, 2017). Like all other immigrant groups in the U.S., challenges faced by African immigrant students cannot be effectively solved without input from their families and communities. This study is one voice of African immigrant families in U.S. public schools. Giving voice to African immigrant families is crucial. Educators need to connect with immigrant families to meet their unique needs and minimize academic disparities (Adair, 2014). Each of the scholarly articles selected addressed sociocultural stressors and challenges faced by immigrant students.

In this literature review, context to what is already known about sociocultural stressors faced by immigrant students is provided. The conceptual framework and an overview of the philosophical worldview that shaped and influenced this research are highlighted. Methodological issues are briefly discussed, and research findings synthesized in this literature review.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Educators need to provide immigrant students with the necessary assistance needed to succeed academically in a timely manner (McLeod, 2019). When the right assistance is provided at the right time, immigrant students are empowered to embrace the learning process in U.S. schools (Glassman, 2001). Providing timely assistance is not possible without understanding meanings immigrant families attached to their experiences in U.S. schools. Educators need to collaboratively interact with immigrant families for context and to produce a conducive learning environment (McLeod, 2019). Therefore, this study uncovered perceptions of African immigrant parents as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. This phenomenon was explored to uncover meanings African immigrant families attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. public schools. Studies reveal educators gained unique insights when perceptions of parents were taken seriously (Cohen-Vogel & Smrekar, 2012).

The focus of this study was shaped and framed by social constructivism (Creswell, 2014). People desire to understand and make sense of their lived experiences (Berk, 2010). Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of people from different backgrounds interacting, to develop socially, and construct their knowledge of each other's lived experiences (McKinley, 2015). Social constructivism stresses, people can understand the lived experiences of others, not by observation, but by interaction (Morrice, 2013). Bridges can be built when people of different

socioeconomical, racial, and ethnic backgrounds interact with one another (Lundgren & Poell, 2016). By engaging and interacting with each other, people of different backgrounds can develop a deeper understanding and appreciation leading to meaningful relationships (McKinley, 2015). The relationship formed through intercultural interactions can influence how meanings are created of the shared experienced (Morrice, 2013).

Within the context and structure of social constructivism, people attach meanings to their experiences as they interact with others (Glassman, 2001). One way people form meanings out of their experiences is through reflection (Lundgren & Poell, 2016). Perceptions are formed based upon experiences as people interact with each other. The perceptions developed based upon interpretations of experiences unconsciously lead to assumptions (Lundgren & Poell, 2016). Without reflecting on assumptions, experiences are void of context (Morrice, 2013).

Reflection brings about awareness of how and why individuals perceive the world and people differently. Reflection enables people to make choices based on understanding gained from interactions than mere assumptions (Lundgren & Poell, 2016). Reflection results in connecting and engaging with others in ways that lead to meaningful relationships (McKinley, 2015). Reflection within social constructivism structure is more than an intellectual exercise. Reflection involves engaging others and exploring their lived experience to gain a new appreciation based upon understanding of their lived experience (Lundgren & Poell, 2016; Morrice, 2013). As people of different backgrounds engage and interact with each other, they can better understand and relate to the lived experience of each other. Within the structure of social constructivism, people attach meanings to their lived experiences, not by accepting the opinion of others. Instead, they reflect upon their experiences in ways that empower them to negotiate their meanings, purpose, and values (McKinley, 2015).

There are multiple benefits for people of different ethnicity and racial groups to interact and reflect upon their lived experiences. Through interactions, they can put aside their biases and examine the reasons behind why they relate to people different from them as they do (Lundgren & Poell, 2016). People of different backgrounds and racial groups need to understand their cultural values and belief systems in isolation cannot adequately resolve the challenges they face (Morrice, 2013). As educators and African immigrant parents interact, they can build meaningful relationships. Educators and families of African immigrants need to work together to build capacity for the academic success of their children.

Immigrant students have significantly changed the demography in U.S. schools (Goodwin, 2017). The change in demography brings new challenges to U.S. public schools. Educators must create a sense of belonging and a conducive environment for students of all backgrounds to succeed academically (Banks & Banks, 2019). This literature review highlights challenges faced by immigrant students and how educators are creating conducive environments to bridge the academic achievement gaps. The literature review also reveals efforts in U.S. public schools to minimize negative stressors and academic disparity when educators understood sociocultural stressors faced by immigrant students (Adair, 2014; Banks & Banks, 2019).

### **Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature**

This study uncovered African immigrant families' perceptions as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. The research question was "What are African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. schools?" Based on the research question and conceptual framework, a literature review of multiple studies and articles was done. The literature review provided the evidence-base that grounds this study. To review the literature without bringing any preconceived bias into the research, keyword brainstorming was conducted.



Based on the keywords generated, 70 studies on challenges faced by immigrant students were reviewed. Four of the 70 studies reviewed addressed African immigrant students specifically.

Almost all the studies in this literature review are qualitative with appropriately five quantitative and one mixed method. The studies collected data using longitudinal interviews, direct observation methods, and semistructured interview formats. Some used a questionnaire about standards-based curriculum contents and competencies. One of the studies highlighted self-esteem along with cultural awareness and racial pride. Other studies collected data through pre and post-session measures.

### **Overview of Immigrant Experience in U.S. Schools**

Researchers have extensively studied immigrant groups in U.S. schools. Multiple studies found the educational experiences of immigrant students were negatively impacted by sociocultural factors (Adair, 2014; Ford, 2012; Goodwin, 2017). Immigrant students encountered bias and hostility from their non-immigrant peers due to stereotypes and misconceptions (Ford, 2012; Norris, 2014). These challenges led to poor self-esteem that affected the confidence of some immigrant students to perform well academically (Norris, 2014).

Multiple studies list sociocultural stressors that negatively affected the educational experiences of immigrant students. Some stressors are learning a new language, cultural value-based clashes, and having limited financial options and resources (Braganza & Lad, 2013; Goodwin, 2017; Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Other stressors are difficulties adjusting to a new culture while encountering racial biases and discriminations (Ford, 2012; Norris, 2014). These stressors have affected how immigrant students adjust to the U.S. educational system. While trying to adjust to schools in the U.S., studies found the above listed sociocultural stressors led to poor self-concept or the lack of self-concept (Norris, 2014). For example, immigrant students tend not

to speak in class (although they understood the contents and knew the right answers) due to lack of self-concept that undermined their confidence (Ford, 2012; Hibel & Jasper, 2012; Norris, 2014).

While some immigrant students adapted despite the challenges, these sociocultural stressors impeded the academic performance of other immigrant students (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). For example, Hispanic male immigrant students performed poorly in some U.S. schools because they experienced stereotypes and biases (Braganza & Lad, 2013). Some African immigrant students from East Africa could not perform well in U.S. schools because of hostility from their White peers. Other immigrant students could not perform well in U.S. schools because of names calling from their White peers (Goodwin, 2017). As revealed in multiple studies, adjusting to the educational system in the U.S. has been a challenge for all immigrant families (Ford, 2012).

The 70 empirical studies reviewed for this research are clear on the following findings. The educational experiences of immigrant students in U.S. schools were negatively affected by sociocultural factors. Immigrant students faced social stressors that led to low academic achievements (Ford, 2012; Hibel & Jasper, 2012; Norris, 2014). Immigrant students encountered racial biases and discriminations (Braganza & Lad, 2013; Ford, 2012). Sociocultural stressors led to poor self-concept that undermined the confidence of immigrant students in U.S. schools (Hibel & Jasper, 2012; Norris, 2014).

Studies further revealed sociocultural stressors that negatively affected immigrant students can be addressed. Sociocultural stressors can be addressed by continuously studying the environment in which immigrant students are learning (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Educators need to consistently evaluate the achievement gap holistically (Grothaus & Schellenberg, 2012). Educators need to connect and engage immigrant families in the educational endeavors of their

children (Lowenhaupt, 2014). Educators can motivate immigrant students to succeed academically when educators engage immigrant families. Misconceptions and biases educators have can be minimized when educators engage immigrant families (Lowenhaupt, 2014).

### **Learning Environment of Immigrant Students**

The learning environment was crucial to the success of immigrant students in U.S. schools (Ford, 2012). Immigrant students encountered many challenges when they migrate to the U.S. (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Some challenges were language barriers, acculturation, difficulties adapting to a new culture, racial biases and discriminations (Braganza & Lad, 2013). When immigrant students entered U.S. schools, the environment in which they learned determined the degree of their success and/or failures (Hibel & Jasper, 2012).

A conducive learning environment is one in which every student is valued and respected. In such an environment, educators engaged and motivated each student (Clark et al., 2013). For example, in a study, educators understood the sociocultural stressors that negatively affected immigrant students. Those educators properly engaged and motivated each student to succeed (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). When educators put in place motivational interventions, immigrant students were at their best academically (Braganza & Lad, 2013).

A conducive learning environment positively influenced the success of immigrant students (Noguera, 2012). In one study, educators did not dismiss but sought to understand sociocultural stressors to effectively support immigrant students' success in schools (Clark et al., 2013). In a conducive learning environment, educators understood immigrant students started at a disadvantage and had few options and financial resources (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Studies found there was a strong link between sociocultural stressors and academic achievements (Dixson & Donnor, 2013). When educators valued and respected immigrant students,

interventions were put in place to help each student succeed academically (Clark et al., 2013; Ford, 2012).

An unhealthy learning environment is one in which biases, stereotypes, and cultural differences influenced how educators relate to some students (Noguera, 2012). A study found teachers had low expectations for immigrant students because of culturally specific differences. The differences were based on values, behaviors, beliefs, customs, attitudes, and traditions (Ford, 2012). Immigrant students encountered deeply rooted misconceptions and stereotypes by their peers in U.S. schools (Ford, 2012). Immigrant students felt they were often overlooked both by their teachers and peers in U.S. schools (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). In these unhealthy school environments, immigrant students did not perform well academically. When teachers had low expectations as it related to the academic ability of immigrant students, it was difficult for immigrant students to succeed academically (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). When there were culturally specific differences in values, behavior, beliefs, customs, attitudes, and traditions, immigrant students did poorly academically (Ford, 2012).

In a study conducted by Noguera (2012), the academic success of immigrant students was negatively affected in a hostile, and unfriendly learning environment. The study focused on the rhetoric educators used as descriptors of male immigrant students. Because of negative descriptors, the academic achievement gap is 31% higher with male immigrant students. States with the largest achievement gaps are Nebraska (43%), New York (43%), Wisconsin (42%), Ohio (37%), and Illinois (36%) (Noguera, 2012). The study highlighted hostility led to poor academic performance among immigrant students (Noguera, 2012).

The study by Dixon and Donnor (2013), revealed a hostile learning environment was not conducive to academic productivity. This study examined how and why educational disparities

exist within U.S. schools. The study highlighted race, class, gender, and ability as factors contributing the educational disparities in U.S. schools. The study found the educational quality for students of color remains fundamentally unequal. The findings suggest immigrant students were not productive academically when their non-immigrant peers called them names and made fun of their appearances. Immigrant students were mocked by other non-immigrant students when they tried communicating with teachers. What made matters worse was teachers did not intervene to stop the mockery. The study revealed there was a link between an unhealthy learning environment and academic achievements (Dixson & Donnor, 2013).

The study by Ford (2012) highlighted the changing demographics in U.S. schools. The primary research question was, “What does the future hold for Black, Hispanic, and English language learners in special education?” The study revealed the percentage of immigrant students in U.S. public schools increased from 32% to 45% over the last two decades. The study presents an overview of demographics in schools and special education. Overrepresentation was discussed and practical suggestions for changes now and in the future provided. The study emphasized where there were hostile learning environments, immigrant students could not focus and were identified and labeled as having learning disabilities. For example, immigrant students were afraid to ask questions in class because they feared been mocked by their non-immigrant peers. (Ford, 2012).

### **Achievement Gap**

The academic achievement gap focuses on disparities in the performance of students in U.S. schools. Multiple measures are used to determine educational performance disparities. Standardized test scores, grade point average, course selection, dropout rates, college enrollment and completion rates are used to determine success measures (Ansell, 2011).

Clark, Flores, Orrock, Ponjuan, and Wilson (2013) conducted a study that identified factors in the academic achievement gap. The study focused specifically on Latino male immigrant students. School counselors and administrators were interviewed to explore their perceptions of barriers and resources related to Latino male students' educational goals. Lack of awareness of educational obstacles for Latino male students by educators as contributing factor for the achievement gap was examined. The role of Latino male students' families in the educational experiences of the students were also examined. The study explored the outcome of educational program outreach to Latino immigrant families. Gender, race, and ethnicity were identified factors in the academic achievement gap (Clark et al., 2013).

Self-concept was one factor that contributed to the achievement gap among children of immigrants (Bryan & Morrison, 2014). In the study by Adelson and Niehaus (2013), the self-concept of some immigrant students was affected by placement in English as a Second Language (ESL). Immigrant children from English speaking countries like the Caribbean and Africa were placed into ESL classes when they enrolled in U.S. schools. For most of these immigrant students, English is the only language they spoke. When they were placed in ESL, the placement affected their self-concept, leading to self-doubt, lack of interest and low academic achievements (Adelson & Niehaus, 2013).

Lack of self-concept can lead to poor academic performance. The study conducted by Bryan and Morrison (2014) in New York highlighted the link between self-doubt or lack of self-concept and poor academic performance. The study focused on Caribbean students in U.S. public schools. The study found the educational outcomes of Caribbean immigrant students were poor due to low academic achievements and high dropout rates. The study attributes poor educational outcomes of Caribbean immigrant students to racial discrimination, inappropriate assessment,

misplacement in school programs, and lack of parental involvement. Other stressors reported in the study included family problems, identity confusion, difficulty making friends, anxiety, feelings of isolation, and depression. All the listed stressors led to self-doubt, which resulted in poor academic performance (Bryan & Morrison, 2014).

The study conducted by Adelson and Niehaus (2013) revealed the self-concept of immigrant students was also affected by labeling them as having learning disabilities. The study by Ford (2012), highlighted educators sometimes quickly identified and labeled immigrant students as having behavioral problems and learning disabilities without considering sociocultural factors. Hibel and Jasper (2012), conducted a study that revealed immigrant students were not timely and properly placed in special education intervention programs although labeled and identified as having learning disabilities. As a result, immigrant students did encounter substantial negative consequences that undermined their progress in U.S. schools (Hibel & Jasper, 2012).

Racial stigma and stereotypes were factors that negatively affected the self-concept of immigrant students and led to poor academic performance (Bryan & Morrison, 2014). Educators who understood the impact of negative self-concept, devised early intervention programs to help immigrant students succeed (Norris, 2014). U.S. schools that implemented early school-based interventions bridged the gap in academic achievement for immigrant students (Ford, 2012).

Educators in U.S. schools are working with immigrant students to narrow the educational achievement gap (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Based on the research cited in this literature review, four crucial steps narrowed the educational achievement gap. Educators avoided racial stigma and stereotypes that affected a child's self-concept, leading to poor academic performance (Bryan & Morrison, 2014). Specific interventions were put in place to enhance the self-concept

of each child (Goodwin, 2017). Educators served as advocates for immigrant students by relating in ways that boosted the self-esteem of each student (Dixson & Donnor, 2013). Educators were encouraged to seek collaboration and partnerships with immigrant families (Clark et al., 2013).

### **Partnership Between Educators and Immigrant Families**

The study by Lowenhaupt (2014), sought to develop a theoretical understanding of how school practices influence immigrant families' access and participation. The study drew upon a statewide survey of practice in schools in Wisconsin that serve New Latino Diaspora. Data included comments from principals and teachers working with immigrant students. The findings revealed the immense efforts of educators to ensure the success of Spanish-speaking immigrant students failed due to the lack of family participation. The study emphasized partnerships with parents was crucial for educators because parental involvement sometimes led to positive results. Parental involvement was key to a student's success across racial and ethnic backgrounds (Lowenhaupt, 2014). In an article for educators, Noguera (2012), stressed while partnerships can enhance academic success, there were barriers to partnerships between immigrant families and educators. Some barriers were low expectations, casting of blames, and misconceptions due to implied biases (Noguera, 2012). More barriers to partnerships between educators and immigrant families are highlighted in the study by Chitiyo and Nyemba (2018).

The study by Chitiyo and Nyemba (2018) was conducted in Cincinnati, Ohio. The participants were Zimbabwean immigrant mothers. The study examined parental involvement practices by immigrant families from Zimbabwe in U.S. schools. The study drew upon the parental involvement framework of Epstein et al., (2002). The study examined Zimbabwean immigrant mothers' participation in their children's schooling and challenges encountered while participating. Semistructured, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews were used to collect data.



Thematic coding was used to analyze the data. The findings of the study indicated Zimbabwean immigrant mothers extensively participated in their children's education. The findings of the study revealed the desires of immigrant families to partner with educators for the academic success of their children. The findings indicated educational stakeholders including school administrators and teachers failed at connecting with immigrant families. Educators did not have a better understanding of the cultural backgrounds of immigrant children to empower them to succeed in U.S. schools. Thus, the partnership between educators and families were gravely hindered (Chitiyo & Nyemba, 2018).

Another reason partnership between educators and immigrant families failed was due to cultural value clashes. Immigrant families while adjusting to a new culture, must raise their kids based on values opposite to their culture of origin. In a culture that seems to promote minimum parental control, immigrant parents feared exerting authority and influence over their children (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014). Values immigrant parents held dear about accountability and academic achievements were not emphasized to their children for fear of getting into trouble with the U.S. government (Ford, 2012).

Based on the research in this literature review, there is a need for U.S. schools to forge partnerships with immigrant families to properly meet their needs. The study by Lowenhaupt (2014), on family engagement practices in schools in Wisconsin, emphasized challenges immigrant students faced in school could not be solved without input from their families and communities. Developing and maintaining partnerships with immigrant families and communities bridged the gap between the academic achievements of immigrant students and their non-Hispanic White peers. The study revealed while some U.S. schools were seeking ways to forge partnerships with immigrant families, other U.S. schools did little to connect with

immigrant families (Lowenhaupt, 2014). In an article written for school counselors, Bryan and Morrison (2014), shared when educators connected with immigrant families, the self-esteem of students was enhanced (Bryan & Morrison, 2014).

The study by Clark et al (2014), interviewed school counselors and administrators to explore perceptions of barriers and resources related to Latino male students. The study examined lack of awareness among educators about educational obstacles for Latino male students. The study also examined the role of educational program outreach and partnership as it related to Latino male students. The study emphasized enhancing the self-esteem of immigrant students is one reason partnerships between educators and immigrant families should be encouraged (Clark et al., 2013).

Encouraging partnerships between educators and immigrant families gives voice to immigrants in the educational endeavors of their children (Lowenhaupt, 2014). Multiple research on other immigrant groups have given them a platform to voice their challenges and sociocultural stressors. African immigrant families have not been given the same attention by researchers. There is one major reason for limited research on the experiences of African immigrants in U.S. schools. Researchers often think African Americans and African immigrants are the same and have the same challenges (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013). African Americans and African immigrants do not have the same challenges. While multiple research studies have been done on African American students, limited research has been done on African immigrant students. Because of the limited research done on African immigrant students, they lack voice in the U.S. educational system (Goodwin, 2017). This research serves as a means to provide voice to African immigrant families from Liberia living in a metropolitan city in the Pacific Northwest.

Scholars projected by 2040, one in every three children born in the U.S. will have parents who immigrated (Suarez-Orozco, 2012). The population of African immigrant students in U.S. public schools is growing rapidly (Goodwin, 2017). Scholars, educators, and policymakers need to understand sociocultural stressors and challenges faced by immigrant students. As educators understood the experiences of immigrant children, measures were put in place to ensure immigrant children adapt well in U.S. schools (Suarez-Orozco, 2012). African immigrants are the least researched immigrant group in U.S. schools (Goodwin, 2017). African immigrants need to be represented when policies are enacted. Educational policymakers need to uncover meanings African immigrant families attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. This study provides a vehicle for sharing the voices of eight African immigrants families from Liberia, West Africa in U.S. schools.

### **Review of Methodological Issues**

There are three types of general research approaches or methodologies: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. These research approaches are often shaped and influenced by the philosophical worldviews of pragmatism, post-positivism, social constructivism, or advocacies (Creswell, 2014). The underlying philosophical worldview of the researcher and past research studies on the topic determined the research methods. The research methods included research questions, process of data collection, analysis of data, interpretation of data, validation and write-up of the data (Creswell, 2014). Almost all the studies in the literature review for this dissertation are qualitative.

Multiple sources have been used to collect data on immigrant students. The study conducted by Hibel and Jasper (2012), accessed Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLS-K) to collect and analyze data. The data included official

student records, interviews with parents, direct child assessments, as well as questionnaires administered to children, parents, teachers, and school principals (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). The longitudinal study was used to examine the achievement levels of students from different racial and ethnic groups.

The studies and articles reviewed were empirical. For example, in the study conducted by Clarke, Eltareb, Macciomei, Patel, and Wickham (2016), a convergent parallel mixed-methods design was used for the study. The sample included 189 newcomer immigrant public high school students from 34 countries of origin. Quantitative measures included the Multicultural Events Scale for Adolescents, Family Conflicts Scale, and the Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment (ASEBA). Qualitative data were collected through a semistructured interview (Clarke et al., 2016). The purpose of the study was to explore the interactive role of family stressors on school outcomes for newcomer adolescent immigrants. The goal was to put in place a mechanism for educators to understand early risk factors for new immigrant students. Determining early risk factors can lead to identifying students with greatest need and providing the support needed for the students to succeed academically (Clarke et al., 2016).

Some studies used phenomenological data analysis procedures to analyze data. For example, the study by Malott, Alessandria, Kirkpatrick and Carandang (2009), focused on a large Mexican population in a small Atlantic city. The participants range in ages from 14 to 18. The study used phenomenological data analysis procedures to analyze the data collected from 20 volunteers of Mexican descent (Malott et al., 2009). Some of the studies were behavioral interventions. The research designs used in the studies were single subject, experimental, and quasi-experimental designs. The studies focused on immigrant students and were conducted in the U.S.A.

Other studies collected data through pre and post-session measures and assigned scores using descriptive statistics to analyze data from questionnaires. For example, in the study conducted by Guerra, Leidy, and Toro (2010), recent Mexican immigrant families were the target of the study. The study used pre- and post-test self-reported surveys (9-month interval) and qualitative data from focus groups. 282 children (ages 9–12) participated in the survey study and 12 mothers participated in the focus group. Results based upon post-test follow-up indicated parental involvement motivated and led to improvement in a child's social problem-solving skills and social self-efficacy (Guerra et al., 2010). Schellenberg and Grothaus (2009), collected data through a pre and post session measures and assigned score using descriptive statistics to analyze the data from the questionnaires.

The studies had other participants besides immigrant students. Other participants included school principals and school counselors. Some studies had as participants university administrators, a guidance services director of a local school, and college administrators. All participants besides immigrant students were people who worked on multicultural issues, programs and interventions involving immigrants and minority students.

The studies in this literature review examined the academic achievement gap between immigrant students and White students. Some studies considered attendance, time enrolled in school and special education as non-academic educational indicators to determined school experiences. One study measured the self-concepts of participants. For example, Adelson and Niehaus (2013) examined the measurement and interpretation of self-concept among English as a second language (ESL) students. The study focused on three categories of immigrant ESL students. Spanish speaking ESL students, Asian language background ESL students, and immigrant students from English speaking countries. The study measured the self-concepts of

participants by using self-description questionnaire (Adelson & Niehaus, 2013). Another study measured the self-concepts of the participants by using the Pier-Harris Children Self-Concept Scale (PHCSCS). Kenny and McEachern (2009) conducted a quantitative study in one of the largest school districts in south Florida. About 214 students between ages 9 to 12 from the fourth and fifth grades were selected to participate in the study. Hispanic students made up 60% of the participants. Haitian immigrants' students made up 23% of the participants with non-Hispanic White making up 17%. The study measured the self-concepts of the participants by using the Pier-Harris Children Self-Concept Scale (PHCSCS) (Kenny & McEachern, 2009).

About four articles were written for school counselors. The articles gave practical recommendations for forging inclusive partnerships with immigrant families. The articles were chosen as part of the literature review because of the specific recommendations they offered. For example, Bal and Perzigian (2013) recommended educators focus on the strengths of immigrant students as motivation to succeed in school. It was recommended educators seek to understand sociocultural barriers faced by immigrant students. Educators were encouraged to apply early interventions to help students adapt to the new culture and succeed in school (Bal & Perzigian, 2013).

### **Credibility, Validation, and Trustworthiness of the Studies**

When evaluating qualitative studies, the focus is on the credibility or validity and trustworthiness of the study (McMillan, 2012). There was no visible evidence the researchers brought bias or meaning to the research. Instead, they focused on the participant's meanings and perspectives. By focusing on participants' meanings, researchers avoided generalization. The studies are credible, validated, and trustworthy because researchers did not manipulate the process. They went in the field and collected data by interacting with participants (Creswell,

2013). The data collection process limited generalization because the goal of qualitative research is not to state a hypothesis and then formulate and gather data to prove or disprove such a hypothesis (McMillan, 2012). For example, the study conducted by Ssekannyo (2010) used a qualitative approach from the perspective of Ogbu's cultural ecological theory about immigrant and minority students. The study was conducted in Southern California among Ugandan immigrant students. Interview questionnaires were used to gather data from 10 participants. The interviews were voice recorded, transcribed, interpreted, coded, and categorized into themes. Data were collected in the field through interactions with participants. Fourteen open-ended questions were asked participants to help capture participants' perspective (Ssekannyo, 2010).

The other qualitative studies were credible because researchers asked open-ended questions and used multiple forms of data collection. None of the studies relied on a single data source. Data for the studies were gathered from existing documents (prior data), direct observations and structured interviews. For example, Chitiyo and Nyemba (2018) conducted a study in Cincinnati, Ohio. Eight Zimbabwean immigrant mothers participated in the study. The study examined parental involvement practices by immigrant families from Zimbabwe in U.S. schools. The study drew upon the parental involvement framework of Epstein et al., (2002). The study examined Zimbabwean immigrant mothers' participation in their children's schooling and challenges encountered while participating. Semistructured, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews were used to collect data. Thematic coding was used to analyze the data (Chitiyo & Nyemba, 2018).

The quantitative studies in this literature review are credible, reliable, and free of bias. Variables and instruments used for pretests and posttests were stated. The researchers stated sample sizes and show how data were analyzed. Measurable indicators were stated in the studies.

For example, the study conducted by Kenny and McEachern (2009), stated 214 students between ages 9 to 12 from fourth and fifth grades participated in the study. Hispanic immigrants made up 60% of participants. Haitian immigrants made up 23% of participants while non-Hispanic Whites made up 17% of participants. The study revealed 49% of sample was made up of fifth grade students. The researchers further elaborated on the analysis of the samples by stating sample size for Latin and South American students was too small for independent analyses. The Pier-Harris Children Self-Concept Scale (PHCSCS) was used to measure the self-concepts of participants (Kenny & McEachern, 2009).

### **Synthesis of Research Findings**

Immigrant parents have high expectations for their children to succeed in U.S. schools (Ford, 2012). However, most immigrant students start at a disadvantage. They must learn English as they enter a new community and/or school. They also have limited financial resources and opportunities available (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Immigrant parents raised their children based on values opposite to their culture of origin (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014). The values of immigrant families often clash with the values of the new culture. A culture their children must assimilate to for their education. Immigrant parents view the new culture as promoting minimum parental control (Ford, 2012). This perception of the new culture causes immigrant parents to fear exerting authority and influence over their children (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). The values of the parents about accountability and academic achievements are not emphasized to their children. Immigrant parents fear getting into trouble with the U.S. government (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014; Ford, 2012).

Adjusting to the U.S. educational system can be a challenge for immigrant students. Immigrant male students were quickly identified and labeled as having behavioral problems and



learning disabilities (Ford, 2012). The behavior problems for which immigrant students were labeled were culturally acceptable behaviors different from that of the White culture (Braganza & Lad, 2013). For example, in most cultures, it is acceptable and expected immigrant students will not make eye contact with an authoritative figure or speak while an elder is speaking (Ford, 2012). When immigrant students display such culturally acceptable behavior, their new teachers labeled them as having behavioral and learning disabilities (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014). Teachers made unwarranted referrals due to misunderstanding or insensitivity to cultural differences (Ford, 2012). Understanding sociocultural barriers was essential to identifying and applying early interventions for immigrant children. Early interventions in schools helped immigrant students adapt to the new culture and became successful in U.S. schools (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014). Understanding sociocultural stressors immigrant students faced led to sensitivity and culturally relevant teaching (Clark et al., 2013).

One factor contributing to poor academic achievement among children of immigrants was self-concept (Bryan & Morrison, 2014). Language barriers, acculturation, difficulties adapting to a new culture, racial biases and discriminations were factors that affected how immigrant children valued themselves (Norris, 2014). Studies tied academic success or the lack thereof to self-concept (Bryan & Morrison, 2014). Racial stigma and stereotypes affected a child's self-concept, leading to poor academic performance. Some educators understood the impacts of social and racial factors in developing self-concept. Those educators devised early intervention programs to help immigrant students succeed in schools (Bryan & Morrison, 2014). Partnerships with immigrant families and the community enhanced self-concept (Bal & Perzigian, 2013).

## **Critique of Previous Research**

All the literature reviewed addressed different components of the challenges faced by immigrant students. Some of the studies revealed the educational experiences of immigrant students were negatively impacted due to racial biases and discriminations (Adair, 2014; Ford, 2012; Goodwin, 2017; Hibel & Jasper, 2012; Lowenhaupt, 2014; Norris, 2014). While the studies had educators and immigrant students as participants, the study conducted by Adair (2014) had only educators as participants. The study conducted by Adair (2014), interviewed 50 preschool teachers in five U.S. cities. Critical race theory (CRT), and post-structural analytical tools were used within a comparative framework to understand Whiteness from the perspective of White teachers responding to newly arrived immigrant families. The findings highlight Whiteness was found to prevent teachers from responding in engaged and positive ways to immigrant families (Adair, 2014). While the findings revealed White teachers perceptions of immigrant families, there is a gap in measuring the impact of the findings to the lived experiences of newly arrived immigrant students. Including immigrant families would have closed the gap in measuring the impact of the findings and strengthened the validity of the study.

Some of the studies focused on the self-concept of immigrant students. The study conducted by Adelson and Niehaus (2013), found the self-concept of some immigrant students was affected by placement in English as a Second Language (ESL). The study used a 3-group analysis to compare children from native English-speaking, Spanish-speaking, and Asian language backgrounds. This study examined the measurement and interpretation of self-concept among immigrant children who are English Language Learners (ELLs). Data were drawn from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998–99 (Pollack, Atkins-Burnett, Rock, & Weiss, 2005), in which an adapted version of the Self-Description

Questionnaire–I (SDQ-I; Marsh, 1990b) was used to measure children's self-concept in 3rd grade. 11,020 native English-speaking children, 1,277 Spanish-speaking ELLs, and 546 ELLs from Asian language backgrounds participated in the study. The study found the placement affected the self-concept of immigrant students from the Caribbean. Poor self-concept led to self-doubt, lack of interest and low academic achievements (Adelson & Niehaus, 2013). The study found Asian language ELLs reported higher academic self-concept only in the subject of mathematics. Spanish-speaking ELLs reporting higher academic self-concept in reading, mathematics, and all school subjects. English-speaking immigrant children reported poor academic self-concept in all school subjects. The study created more questions about academic self-concept. Where there other socioeconomic stressors that were not reflected in the results of the study? The validity of the study would have been strengthened by digging deeper in themes during the analysis to find why placement in ESL affected English speaking immigrant negatively.

Other studies highlight parental involvement was key to a student's success across racial and ethnic backgrounds (Chitiyo & Nyemba, 2018; Clark et al., 2013; Lowenhaupt, 2014; Noguera, 2012). Yan and Lin (2005) conducted a quantitative study to examine the relationship between academic achievement (especially in math) and parental involvement. The primary data source was the National Educational Longitudinal Study:1988 (NELS:88). This longitudinal study was used to examine the achievement levels of students from four racial and ethnic groups. The four racial groups studied were Caucasians, African Americans, Asians, and Hispanic immigrants. The study analyzed 39 parents' involvement with their children's educational pursuit from eighth to 12th grades.

The study found Caucasian parents were more involved with their children's schooling than other racial and ethnic groups. African American parents contacted the schools more frequently about their children's performance than other racial groups. Hispanic immigrant parents were tougher on rules than Caucasians. Asian American parents expected more from their children than all ethnic and racial groups combined. The study found Asian American students achieved better at mathematics than other groups in the study. Caucasian students performed better in math than African American and Hispanic students. The study concluded parental involvement was key to a student's success across racial and ethnic backgrounds (Yan & Lin, 2005).

While I do agree parental involvement was key to a students' success across racial and ethnic lines, this study would have been strengthened by clarifying the statistics that led to the conclusion. It seems parental involvement was not the only factor affecting the performance of students. The findings of the study would have been strengthened if the researchers have indicated the correlative measures of the degree between the two variables (achievement in mathematics and parental involvement). The statistics indicated African American parents contacted the school more frequently than other groups about the performance of their children. Asian immigrant parents did not contact the school as African American parents did. Caucasian parents were more involved with the school, attending meetings, and other school functions. Yet Asian immigrant students performed better in math than any other group. It seems as though something is missing. Based on this statistic, what is the correlative measure or strength of parental involvement? Were Asian parents more involved because of their academic expectations? Were Asian American parents faced with the same sociocultural factors as African American parents?

## **Summary**

The literature review focused on sociocultural stressors that negatively affected immigrant students. Expectations of immigrant parents for their children to succeed in U.S. schools were high, but most immigrant students started at a disadvantage (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Multiple studies highlighted the challenges faced by immigrant students. About 70 studies on challenges faced by immigrant students were reviewed. Four of the studies addressed African immigrants' students specifically. There was a need for this study to examine perceptions of African immigrant parents as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. Other immigrant groups have been extensively studied. African immigrants have received little attention from researchers. This study gives voice to African immigrant families as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. The focus was on uncovering meanings African immigrant families attach to their children's experiences in U.S. schools.

Uncovering meanings African immigrant families attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools is critical. African immigrants valued education and have high expectations for their children to succeed in U.S. schools (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013; Ford, 2012). The findings of this study are the voices of African immigrant families from Liberia in the Pacific Northwest about their children's experiences in U.S. schools. Educators are given a glimpse into how African immigrant parents from Liberia supported their children in U.S. schools. The study gives educators insights into the meanings African immigrant families from Liberia attached to the experiences of their children.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

In this methodology chapter, processes put in place for conducting this study is discussed. The design choice and data collection process are explained, and analysis provided. The design choice for this dissertation is a qualitative ethnographic case study. About 70 studies on the experiences and sociocultural stressors of immigrant students in the U.S. were reviewed. Except for five, all the studies were qualitative. This dissertation examined African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. schools. The research design is a qualitative ethnographic case study about the experiences of African immigrant students in U.S. public schools. The purpose of the study, research questions, and research design are explained in this chapter. Target populations, sampling methods, instrumentation and data collections are discussed. Data analysis procedures, limitations of the research design, and ethical issues are discussed. A summary of the methodology processes is provided at the end of this chapter.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This research examined perceptions of African immigrant families from Liberia, West Africa as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. The primary research question was, "What are African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. schools?" This phenomenon was explored to uncover meanings African immigrant parents from Liberia attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools.

Multiple studies found the educational experiences of immigrant students were negatively impacted by sociocultural stressors (Ford, 2012). Besides sociocultural stressors, teachers had low expectations as it related to the academic ability of immigrant students than their non-Latino White students (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Culturally specific differences in values, behavior,

beliefs, customs, attitudes, and traditions were factors that caused teachers to have low expectations for immigrant students (Ford, 2012). But what are the perceptions of African immigrant families as it relates to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools? This study explored perceptions of African immigrant families. African immigrant parents have high expectations for their children to succeed in U.S. schools (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013; Ford, 2012; Hibel & Jasper, 2012).

Immigrant families, while adjusting to their new culture, often raise their children based on values opposite to their culture of origin (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014). The values of immigrant families often clash with values of the new culture. The children of immigrant families are to assimilate and become educated in the new culture. For many immigrant parents, the new culture seems to promote minimum parental control (Ford, 2012). This perception of the new culture causes immigrant parents to fear exerting authority and influence over their children. Values the parents held dear about accountability and academic achievements are not emphasized to their children fearing getting into trouble with the government (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014).

This dissertation explored perceptions African immigrant parents have about their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. The focus was on hearing stories the children told their parents about their experiences in U.S. schools. The children were not interviewed for this study. The parents narrated stories shared by their children. While the stories were second-hand information, the parents developed perceptions about U.S. schools based on what their children told them. The goal of this study was to explore and uncover meanings African immigrant families from Liberia attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. schools. Studies revealed understanding the perceptions of parents benefited educators and students. Educators

were benefited from the insights gained by knowing how parents perceived them. Students were benefited because educators put proper interventions in place to ease the concerns of parents (Cohen-Vogel & Smrekar, 2012).

By engaging the parents directly, this study uncovered responses and reactions of African immigrant parents based on the stories told them by their children. Steps African immigrant parents from Liberia took to intervene and the outcomes when their children encountered challenges in U.S. schools were uncovered. Meanings African immigrant parents from Liberia attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools were explored. The perceptions of African Immigrant parents on partnerships with educators to empower their children overcome sociocultural challenges to succeed in U.S. schools were explored.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research question that guides this study was, "What are African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. schools?"

### **Subquestions**

1. What were African immigrant families initial reactions and responses to the experiences of their children in U.S. public schools?
2. How did African immigrant families support their children in U.S. public schools?
3. What are the meanings African immigrant families attached to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools?
4. How did African immigrant families partner and collaborate with educators to empower their children to succeed in U.S. schools?



## **Research Design**

The design choice for this dissertation is a qualitative ethnography case study that examined African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. schools. Ethnographic studies are intended to provide a deeper sense of meaning, that is., why people do what they do. By having an increased and deeper sense of meaning, the researcher can understand the purpose behind the actions or behaviors (Creswell, 2013). Ethnographic research enables the researcher to effectively describe and interpret a culture-sharing group (Creswell, 2013).

There are two specific ethnographic research designs: realistic and critical ethnography (Creswell, 2013). Critical ethnography studies cultural or shared groups marginalized by the system. Critical ethnography is done from the background of inequality and power (Creswell, 2013). Realist ethnography focuses on the objective account of the lived experiences of a cultural or shared group (Creswell, 2013). The goal of realist ethnography study is to share the individual stories of the culture or groups being studied (Creswell, 2013). This study is a realistic ethnography study because the focus is on the lived experiences of African immigrants families from Liberia, West Africa.

Qualitative ethnography case study was chosen as the best fit for this study. The goal of this study was to uncover meanings African immigrant parents attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. public schools. As an ethnography study, the focus was on the account of the lived experiences of each African immigrant family participating in the study. The individual stories of each family were shared as it related to the experiences of African immigrant children in U.S. schools.

This qualitative ethnography case study provided opportunities and flexibility to interact with participants. The study enabled me to describe the lived experiences within the context of how African immigrants perceived U.S. public schools. Since this dissertation examined perceptions of African immigrant families, conducting an ethnography study provided the avenue to explore, instead of manipulating behaviors (Creswell, 2013). An ethnography approach was more focused on the target of the research (Creswell, 2013). By focusing solely on the lived experiences of participants, misrepresentation was avoided (Yin, 2014). Conducting a qualitative ethnography case study narrowed the focus of the inquiry and provided full access to participants to collect the data needed (Creswell, 2013).

This qualitative ethnography case study uncovered perceptions African immigrant families have about their children's experiences in U.S. schools. The data collected created an avenue to potentially uncover any link between academic achievements of African immigrant students and their experiences in U.S. schools. As a qualitative research, emphasis was on the perspectives of African immigrant families about their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. For example, focus group sessions were held at a center that caters to the needs of African immigrants in the Pacific Northwest. Eight families from Liberia, West Africa were randomly selected. During the focus group sessions, efforts were made to ensure the conversations did not drift into racial issues and/or social stressors faced by the community. Even if such a conversation were a part of the focus group discussions, when analyzing the data, the focus was specifically on the actual lived experiences the children had in U.S. public schools.

The data collection methods included a questionnaire, semistructured one-on-one, face-to-face interviews, and focus group sessions. The data collected became part of the larger perspectives of African immigrant parents as it related to their children's experiences in U.S.

public schools. An ethnography approach was chosen because the study had the potential to reveal or share more information on what other researchers have not considered or missed. A story-telling narrative was used to ensure readers understand meanings African immigrant parents attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. public schools without ambiguity.

Multiple studies have shown immigrant parents have high expectations for their children to succeed in school (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013; Ford, 2012; Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Other studies emphasized how values of immigrant families often clash with the values of the new culture (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014). Some studies found teachers were more likely to have low expectations as it related to the academic ability of immigrant students than their non-Latino White students (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Studies also found the educational experiences of immigrant students were negatively affected by sociocultural stressors (Ford, 2012). The studies cited focused mostly on other immigrant groups. This study focused specifically on African immigrants from West Africa. The study provides a clear, accurate, and concise descriptive narrative on the perspectives of African immigrant families. The study provided a platform for African immigrant families to share their insights on how their children are treated in U.S. schools.

### **Target Population, Sampling Method, and Related Procedures**

This section explains data sources and the methods used to access and/or gather data. The research population or participants are discussed in detailed. Backgrounds to the participants, such as cultural, social, and economic contexts are specified. The process for participant selection including sampling procedures and reasons are explained.

African immigrant families from Liberia, West Africa living in an urban area in the Pacific Northwest were the primary target population. There was a large concentration of African immigrant families living in the Pacific Northwest (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013). Eight families were randomly selected to participate in this study. The children of the selected families attended schools in the same public school district.

African immigrants are diverse and do not have the same challenges (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013). For example, the language barrier in U.S. schools is different for immigrants from West Africa. There are 16 countries in West Africa. English is the official language of five countries: Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. Portuguese is the official language of two countries, Cabo Verde and Guinea Bissau. French is the official language in nine countries (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2016).

The language barrier for African immigrants from West Africa when they migrate to the U.S. is different. The language barrier for people from English-speaking West Africa differs from French-Speaking West Africans. This language background is given to show African immigrants have a complex background and U.S. public schools cannot treat everyone from Africa the same. For example, the participants for this study are from Liberia, which is an English-speaking country from West Africa. Writing, reading, or understanding English may not be a huge challenge for immigrant children from Liberia. There may be a need for immigrant children from Liberia to adapt to how English is spoken in the U.S. However, U.S. schools need to understand African immigrants are diverse and should not be treated the same. Studies highlight immigrants from English speaking countries like the Caribbean and Africa were placed into English as a Second Language (ESL) classes when they enrolled in U.S. public schools (Adelson & Niehaus, 2013). Placing every African immigrant student in ESL is not the subject

of this study. However, it is noteworthy to understand that placing immigrant students who fluently comprehend and speak English in ESL can affect their self-concept (Adelson & Niehaus, 2013).

Due to the diverse nature of African immigrants, this study cannot be generalized to all African immigrants. The goal of this study was to be a vehicle to capture and provide the voice of African immigrant families from Liberia, living in a metropolitan city in the Pacific Northwest. This study uncovered perceptions of families from Liberia, West Africa as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. The perceptions of African immigrant families from Liberia as it related to the lived experiences of their children in U.S. public schools were the sole focus of this study. The participants were randomly selected.

Liberia is the oldest republic in Africa and was never officially colonized (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019). In 1821, freed slaves from America were resettled at Cape Mesurado by the American Colonization Society (ACS). In 1824, the freed slaves renamed the region Liberia, meaning, land of liberty. A few years later, freed slaves who had settled in the region proclaimed independence in 1847. From 1847 to 1980, Liberia was led by descendants of freed slaves from America. The first indigenous president came to power by overthrowing the government led by descendants of freed slaves on April 12, 1980. Nine years into the rule of indigenous Liberians, descendants of freed slaves who were no longer in power and mostly living in the U.S., orchestrated a civil war in 1989. The civil war lasted 14 years and extensively destroyed the country, leaving over 300,000 people dead. In 2005, first post-war elections were held and the first female president in Africa was elected in Liberia (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019).

During the civil war in Liberia, many Liberian migrated to the U.S. through various resettlement and refugee programs. Others migrated to the U.S. as tourists and students and later

applied for political asylum and Temporary Protective Status (TPS). Some Liberians migrated to the U.S. on the diversity lottery visa program sponsored by the U.S. State's Department. It is estimated there are over 500,000 Liberian living in the U.S. (<https://www.state.gov/liberia>).

### **Sampling Method**

This study examined perceptions of African immigrant parents as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. African immigrant families from Liberia living in an urban area in the Pacific Northwest were the target of the study. There was no accurate data on the number of Liberians living in the Pacific Northwest. Due to the unknown proportion of the Liberian population in the Pacific Northwest, nonprobability sampling was chosen as the sampling method. Most Liberian immigrant families living in the Pacific Northwest work two or more jobs. As a Liberian immigrant myself, I know firsthand the difficulties in finding family members at home simultaneously. In the interest of time, nonprobability sampling best fitted this study. Another reason for using nonprobability sampling was because this study was exploratory.

The 70 studies considered in the literature review in this study highlight immigrant students are negatively impacted by socioeconomic stressors. The literature review have revealed how the learning environment determined the success or failures of immigrant students. Since this study was exploratory, nonprobability sampling provided the avenue to understand the intricacies of the literature to the experiences of African immigrant students.

### **Invitation to Participate**

Before commencing the study, two community-based organizations that cater to the welfare of African immigrants in the Pacific Northwest were contacted. To protect the identities of the participants in this study, the names of both organizations are not provided. The first organization was contacted to acquire about the requirement and application process for

conducting focus groups sessions at the facility. The second organization was contacted to acquire about the possibility of providing names and contact information of Liberians in a metropolitan city in the Pacific Northwest.

After approval was received from CU-IRB, the two community-based organizations were notified. All the required procedures and guidelines were followed, including submitting a summary of my proposal and approval letter from the CU-IRB to the concerned organizations. To ensure the integrity of the study, all authorization to proceed with the study were provided to the organizations. The first organization consented for the focus group sessions to be held at their facility. The second organization consented to provide names and contact information of possible participants.

### **Selection of Participants**

Prior to selecting and contacting participant, I spoke with the president of the second organization (the community-based organization that consented to provide names and contact information) via phone. I explained the procedure for selecting and inviting participants for the study. I shared with the president of the organization that I am using nonprobability sampling method to recruit participants. I explained what nonprobability sampling is and why the method was chosen. I shared that semistructured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews were the process to collect data. I emphasized participation in the study was voluntarily and participants could withdraw anytime without any penalty of consequences for dropping out of the study. After answering all questions posed by the leader of the organization, we decided on a date and time to meet to start the process of selecting participants.

I arrived at the office of the organization that provided names of participants at 5:00 PM as agreed. I reminded the leader of the organization that I would prefer names of possible

participants within the same school district. I gave the leader of the organization the zip codes within three school districts within the Pacific Northwest. Based upon the contact information he had, one of the school districts had 60 families. The other two school districts had 48 and 37 families respectively. I decided to go with the names of the 60 families. The 60 names of possible participants who live in a metropolitan city in the Pacific Northwest were written on pieces of paper and placed in a box. After placing the 60 names in a box and mixing them, eight families were randomly selected to be invited to participate in the study.

After randomly selecting eight families, phone numbers, addresses, and email contacts of families selected were provided by the community-based organization. The president of the organization called each family selected while I was still with him. The families were told I was conducting a research study and they have been selected for invitation to participate in the study. Everyone called agreed to participate in the study. I met each participant at their homes and discussed content of the consent form. Each participant was presented with a copy of the consent form. We went over every statement on the consent form line by line. After answering all questions satisfactorily, each participant signed the consent form. The participants were excited about participating in the study. However, almost everyone expected monetary incentives although they were told over the phone there was no monetary incentive. One family told me every organization that had ever contacted them for participation in any program gave them money. I told the participants they were not participating in a program but a study. Some participants wanted to know if the study would confront U.S. public schools about how their children are treated. Each participant was told there was no promise and/or guarantee if anything substantial would come out of the study. I reaffirmed and repeated this study is a requirement for completing my study in the doctoral program at Concordia. Each participant expressed



appreciation for my honesty and indicated their willingness to participate in the study. After signing the consent form, one-on-one, face-to-face semistructured interview times were scheduled to be held at each participant's home at a designated date and time based upon the preference of each participant.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Instrumentation is about how the data were collected. Instrumentation includes a survey, questionnaire, interviews, focus groups, direct observation, etc. The key is how the instrument will be used (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research collects data in the field through interactions with participants (Creswell, 2013; McMillan, 2012). One reason for collecting data in the field is to avoid generalization (McMillan, 2012). The data that answered my research questions focused on the participants' perspectives. Multiple instruments, such as a questionnaire, semistructured, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews, and focus group sessions were used to collect data.

### **Data Collection**

This portion of the dissertation gives a clear, specific, and detailed explanation of how data were collected. The primary research question, "What are African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. public schools?" guided this study. Data were collected in the field with the participants. A questionnaire was used to gather data on the perceptions of African immigrant families as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. The focus was on stories African immigrant children told their parents about their experiences in U.S. public schools. The questionnaire helped this researcher understand meanings African immigrant parents attached to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools.

Semistructured one-on-one, face-to-face interview were held with each participant (see Appendix A). An interview protocol was written and used to guide the research related interview questions. Field notes were taken during interactions with participants. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 95 minutes depending on stories the families shared. The interviews were recorded as outlined in the consent document. Permission was requested from participants to record the interviews. The recording ensured the perspectives of participants were captured. The transcripts of the recordings were reviewed with each participant for clarity and accuracy before the transcripts were used for analysis. The recordings were deleted after accuracy of the transcripts with participants was confirmed. Notes were taken during the interviews. The notes were coded to guide the data analysis process.

After collecting data from participants, the digital audio recordings were transcribed. I compared my notes with the transcription of the recordings and made corrections where needed. I double-checked everything for accuracy multiple times to ensure I was not missing anything. To ensure the internal validity of the study, I checked with each participant about accuracy of the transcriptions of the recordings. Internal validity is the extent to which the results of a study reflect the true experiences of participants (McMillan, 2012). I met with each participants to review transcripts of the recording for accuracy. Each participant was given a copy of the transcript for review. Two participants asked for the transcript to be read to them. After reviewing the transcripts, each participant acknowledged everything was accurate.

Two focus group sessions were held besides to the one-on-one, face-to-face interview. Seven of the eight families participated in the focus group sessions. During the focus group sessions-held on two days for an hour each day-participants were given the opportunity to leave if they did not feel comfortable. Everyone stayed and participate in the sessions. The focus group

sessions were guided by the designed questions (see Appendix B). Before discussing the last question, it was clarified to participants they need not state whether their children are doing well academically or not. The participants were asked to speak in general terms. The focus group goal was not to know if someone's child was not doing well in school in front of other families.

The focus group sessions were recorded as outlined in the consent document. The focus group sessions were recorded with permission from participants. Field notes were taken during the focus group sessions. The digital audio recordings of the focus group sessions were transcribed. I compared my notes with the transcription of the recordings and double-checked everything for accuracy multiple times. The participants in the focus group sessions selected three members to meet with me to review the transcription of the recordings. I met with the representatives of participants in the focus group sessions for 45 minutes to confirm accuracy of the transcript. After reviewing the transcripts, no corrections were made, and accuracy was confirmed. The focus group sessions helped to gain greater insight into the larger perceptions of African immigrant families.

### **Identification of Attributes**

This qualitative ethnography case study examined African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. schools. The study explored and uncovered meanings African immigrant families from Liberia attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. schools. The study was conducted in a metropolitan city in the Pacific Northwest. The research questions set the parameter for the study. Semistructured interviews and focus group sessions were used to gather data. Three main attributes defined the focus of this study. During the analysis of the data, common themes were uncovered regarding these three attributes.

1. Initial reactions and responses of African immigrant families to the experiences of their children in U.S. public schools
2. Perceptions of African immigrant families about U.S. schools based on the experiences of their children in U.S. public schools
3. African immigrant families perceptions about partnership and collaboration with educators to empower their children to succeed in U.S. schools

Attitudes, perceptions, and decisions are often a result of childhood experiences.

Perceptions are formed as people interact with others. The perceptions, and interpretations developed unconsciously, often lead to assumptions (Lundgren & Poell, 2016). Assumptions can either enhance or paralyze partnership and collaboration (Morrice, 2013). Uncovering the perceptions of African immigrant families about U.S. schools based on their children's experiences provided critical insights for educators.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Daily Journal entries, interview recordings (transcribed), and field notes (coded) helped in focusing solely on the participants' perspectives. After verification (discussed under data collection procedures) of the accuracy of transcripts of the interviews, recordings, journal entries, and notes with participants, the data collected were analyzed. The analysis started by coding the data collected. Coding helped in organizing the data by separating data into workable units or segments (McMillan, 2012). Descriptive coding was used to pull facts from the data (Richards & Morse, 2013). Descriptive coding shares more light on the data by describing characteristics of the data and answering the who, where, what, and how of the data (Richards & Morse, 2013). For example, who was speaking? Was it the father or mother sharing the experiences of their children? Whose experience did the parent share? Was the student a girl or boy? Which parent

was more emotional in sharing the experiences of the student? Descriptive coding was used to pull crucial facts from the data.

Topic coding was used to create a category. Topic coding provides the avenue for themes to be created from the data (Richards & Morse, 2013). For example, topic coding helped me to derived themes such as “challenges reported involving teachers,” “challenges reported involving peers,” “the schools’ response to the reported experiences,” and “meanings parents attached to the reported experiences.” Analytic coding was used to drill deeper into themes and recognizing extensions of themes to alert the researcher of new themes (Richards & Morse, 2013). In other words, analytical coding enables a researcher to derive new categories based on what is seen across interviews (Richards & Morse, 2013). For example, analytical coding enabled me to develop new categories such as “common challenges reported,” “common cultural reactions,” and “common assumptions of families.” Coding enhanced the process and ability to clearly state meanings participants attached to their lived experiences (McMillan, 2012).

### **Limitations of the Research Design**

For this study to be credible, validated, and trustworthy, a detailed explanation of the limitations is essential (McMillan, 2012). The description of the limitations is detailed about precautions, processes, and challenges (Creswell, 2013; McMillan, 2012). Every study, including this qualitative ethnography case study, has limitations, which adversely affect the results or reduce the internal validity of the study (Creswell, 2013).

### **Limitations**

Ethnography studies provide an increased and deeper sense of meaning (Creswell, 2013). Ethnography studies are prefer methods of effectively describing and interpreting a culture-sharing group (Creswell, 2013; Crowley-Henry, 2009). However, like every research design,

ethnography study has limitations which adversely affect the results or reduce the internal validity of the study (Creswell, 2013; Crowley-Henry, 2009).

The basic limitations of this ethnography study are as followed. As an exploratory study, the findings might not be generalizable to a different setting (Crowley-Henry, 2009). The study was conducted in an urban metropolitan city in the Pacific Northwest. If similar study was conducted in a rural setting, the findings might be slightly different. However, this study could be a basis of an extensive research imploring different methods and parameters.

Due to the specific nature of this ethnography study, replicating the study may be challenging and difficult (Crowley-Henry, 2009). Possibly the findings of a replication of this study might be similar but there may be some variations. However, extending the findings beyond African immigrants from English speaking West African countries can help educators put in place early interventions to help immigrant students succeed in U.S. schools.

Another limitation for ethnography study is researcher bias. Ethnography study seeks to understand a culture-sharing group (Creswell, 2013; Crowley-Henry, 2009; McMillan, 2012). There are two types of ethnographic research: realistic and critical ethnography (Creswell, 2013). Critical ethnography studies cultural or shared groups marginalized by the system. Critical ethnography is done from the background of inequality and power (Creswell, 2013). A critical ethnography researcher could bring unintended bias by unintentionally overstating the findings (Crowley-Henry, 2009). Realist ethnography focuses on the objective account of the lived experiences of a cultural or shared group (Creswell, 2013). A realist ethnography researcher could get emotionally attached, thereby affecting objectivity (Crowley-Henry, 2009). To avoid researcher bias, an ethnography study should check with participants for accuracy of transcripts

to ensure findings reported are an accurate representation of the perspectives of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Crowley-Henry, 2009; McMillan, 2012).

Lastly, this study was narrowly focused on African immigrant families with children in public schools. African immigrant families from Liberia whose children attended private and charter schools were not part of this study. Only African immigrant parents from Liberia were interviewed about their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. African Americans and other minority groups were not the subject of this study. The researcher is an African immigrant parent from Liberia, West Africa. The researcher lived in an urban area in the Pacific Northwest as the participants. However, steps were taken to avoid bringing unintentional and unconscious biases and interpretations to the data analysis. The actual words and perspectives of participants were used. It is hoped this study will provide a deeper understanding and direction or guidance for further studies.

### **Internal Validity**

Internal validity is the extent to which a researcher can say that only the independent variable causes the changes in the dependent variable (McMillan, 2012). The first step in making sure a study has internal validity is to recognize the common threats to internal validity. There are three major threats to internal validity. They are history, mortality, and instrumentation (Creswell, 2013).

Internal validity occurs when something major happens in the study that affects only one group. For this study, efforts were made to avoid a participant not showing up after the first session of the focus group sessions. As an African immigrant, I knew most people in African immigrant communities do not corporate if there is no monetary incentive. To ensure that no one abruptly drops out of the study, every participant randomly selected were told upfront there was

no monetary incentive for participating in this study. Every participant was told clearly what this study was about. There was no ambiguity in stating the goal and purpose of the study. No promise was made to anyone about a reward for participating in the study.

As with internal validity to history, the problem of mortality occurs when a large number of participants drop out of one condition. This might impact representation, affecting the relationship between the variables (McMillan, 2012). These two limitations, history and mortality, are beyond the control of the researcher. However, caution was taken by not making any promise of reward, including not telling participants the study will change the experiences of their children in U.S. schools.

The last threat to internal validity is instrumentation (McMillan, 2012). To avoid the limitation and threat to internal validity, there must be control of the process. For example, a questionnaire was used as one of the instruments to collect data. To avoid limitation and threat to internal validity, the same questionnaire and the same instructions were given to each participant under the same conditions.

### **Credibility**

For the credibility of this study, specific language participants used to describe their children's experiences in U.S. public schools were quoted. This study used a detailed and substantive description to depict participants' perspectives. Only the participants' perspectives are highlighted. Meanings participants attached to the stories their children told them about their lived experiences in U.S. public schools are properly described and quoted.

### **Transferability**

This study was conducted in a metropolitan city in the Pacific Northwest of the U.S. As a qualitative ethnographic case study, the focus was on a small and defined group. The target of



the study was African immigrant families from Liberia living in an urban area in the Pacific Northwest. Eight families were randomly selected to participate in the study. No prediction was made based on recurring experiences. Instead, the study provides a thick and rich description of the experiences of African immigrant children in U.S. schools as narrated by their parents. The findings of the study might not be transferable to other school districts in rural settings in the U.S. The study was conducted in a metropolitan city in the Pacific Northwest.

### **Expected Findings**

It was expected that talking with the family members would result in meaningful information about the experiences of their children. The expectation was that African immigrant families have a unique relationship to U.S. schools that would be evident through the study. The expected findings of this study were intended to achieve three goals. Primarily, the findings of this study were intended to fill a gap in the literature. Second, the findings were intended to give voice to African immigrant communities. This study focused solely on the perspectives of African immigrant families as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. Third, the findings were intended to enhance partnerships between educators and African immigrant communities as they work together for their children to thrive academically in U.S. schools.

### **Ethical Issues**

This section of the methodology chapter describes how risk was minimized and the benefits of the study to participants. The focus was on conflict of interest assessment, the researcher's position, and ethical issues in the study.

### **Conflict of Interest Assessment**

The researcher for this study was not in any supervisory position over participants at the time of the study. The study had no potential financial gain for both the researcher and participants. Participation in this study was strictly voluntary. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time without threat of retaliation or threat to job security. No agreement was made with any outside organization that could pose conflict of interest about reporting accurate results.

### **Researcher's Position**

As the researcher for this study, I was the main research instrument for this qualitative ethnography case study. I collected data personally from participants through one-on-one, face-to-face interviews and focus group sessions. Although I am an African immigrant parent from Liberia, West Africa, this study focused solely on the perspectives of the participants. As an African immigrant, I am aware most people in the African immigrant communities will not fully cooperate if there is no monetary incentive. To ensure no one abruptly drops out of the study, there was no ambiguity in stating the goal and purpose of the study. Caution was taken by not making any promise of reward, including not telling participants the study will change the experiences of their children in U.S. schools. I did not influence the stories shared in any way. I listened to the participants shared the stories of their children's experiences in U.S. public school. The words of the participants informed my thinking about meanings African immigrant families attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. public schools.

### **Ethical Issues in the Study**

To ensure adherence to all ethical standards, the research proposal was submitted to CU-IRB for approval. No attempt was made to proceed with data collection until approval was

received from the CU-IRB. The faculty committee members were consulted throughout the process of data collection and analysis. After approval was received from CU-IRB, community-based organizations that cater to African immigrants in the Pacific Northwest were notified about the need to recruit participants for the study. All required procedures and guidelines were followed, including submitting to the community-based organizations a summary of the proposal and the approval letter from the CU-IRB. To ensure the integrity of the study, all authorization to proceed with the study were provided to the community-based organizations.

Informed consent forms were given to each participant for review and signature before proceeding with any instrument used for data collection. The informed consent stated the conditions and expectations for participating in the study. The consent forms stated the duration and any foreseen risk to participants. Participants were told participation was voluntary with no penalty for refusal to participate. For this study, there was no imminent risk to participants. However, the identity of each participant was not disclosed. A process was put in place to ensure transcripts, recordings, and field-notes were kept confidential. All research data including journal entries, field notes, interview transcripts, recordings and verified transcripts of recordings were stored in a secured locked safe at home. As per CU-IRB requirement, all recordings were immediately deleted after reviewing of transcripts of recordings with participants for accuracy. For documents that needed to be stored like field notes, transcripts of recordings, I am the only one who had access to combination codes on the secured safe at home.

### **Summary**

This study examined perceptions of African immigrant families as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. The primary research question was, "What are African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. schools?" The

focus was on hearing stories children told their parents about their experiences in U.S. schools and meanings parents attached to the stories. Nonprobability sampling method was used to recruit participants. Eight families from Liberia, West Africa were randomly selected to participate in the study. Questionnaire, one-on-one, face-to-face, semistructured interviews, and focus group sessions were used to gather data from participants. The expected findings of this study are the voices of African immigrant families in U.S. schools. This study focused solely on perceptions of African immigrant families as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools.

## **Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results**

### **Introduction**

This study examined perceptions of African immigrant families from Liberia, West Africa as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. The primary research question that guided this study was, "What are African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. public schools?" The Subquestions were:

1. What were African immigrant families initial reactions and responses to the experiences of their children in U.S. public schools?
2. How did African immigrant families support their children in U.S. public schools?
3. What are the meanings African immigrant families attached to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools?
4. How did African immigrant families partner and collaborate with educators to empower their children to succeed in U.S. schools?

This phenomenon was explored to uncover meanings African immigrant parents from Liberia attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. The focus was on hearing stories children told their parents about their experiences in U.S. public schools. This study captured the parents' responses and reactions. Steps parents took to intervene when their children complained, and outcomes were also captured during the study. Meanings African immigrant families attached to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools were captured. Eight families from Liberia, West Africa living in the Pacific Northwest participated in this study.

In this chapter, a detailed explanation of methodology employed in conducting this study is given. Description of the sample is explained along with research methodology. Data sources and methods used to access and/or gather data are explained. Process for participant selection

including sampling procedures and reasons are explained. Findings of the study are summarized and analyzed data presented in an organized manner to provide readers with detailed and synthesized findings. This chapter concludes with a summary.

### **Description of the Sample**

This study was conducted in one public school district in the Pacific Northwest. Nonprobability sampling method was used to recruit participants. Nonprobability sampling was chosen because there was no accurate data on number of Liberians living in an urban area in the Pacific Northwest. Nonprobability sampling was used because this study was exploratory. The study examined perceptions of African immigrant families from Liberia about how their children were treated in U.S. public schools.

Eight families from Liberia, West Africa living in an urban area in the Pacific Northwest were interviewed. Three families were single-family units with only the mothers and children. Five families had both parents, but three fathers did not participate because of work schedule conflicts. Two families had both parents present for the interview, but the mothers shared most stories (see Table 1). The mothers shared the stories of their children's experiences in U.S. schools because they were the ones to whom the children complained. The statement of one father provided insight to why mothers shared most of the stories. The father stated at the beginning of the interview,

Thank you for asking us to participate in this study. We are glad we were selected. My wife will tell you most of the stories because she is the one whom often talks to the children about their school. I worked two jobs. She is responsible for talking with the children and giving me feedback as needed.

Table 1

*Categories of Participants*

Categories of participants	Number of families
Participating families	8
Singled-family households	3
Both parents' household	5
Fathers who could not participate due to work schedule	3
Fathers who participated in the study	2
Mothers who participated in the study	8

*Note.* Eight mothers and two fathers participated in the study. The eight families shared the stories of 21 children.

Participants lived in households ranging from four to nine family members. Five participants classified themselves as low-income families. Three participants classified themselves as middle-class families. The participants migrated to the U.S. from 2003 to 2014. Six families came directly to the Pacific Northwest when they entered the U.S. and have only lived in metropolitan city in the Pacific Northwest. Two participants moved to the Pacific Northwest after living in other U.S. States for 1 to 2 years. Three families came to the U.S. as refugees from Liberia due to the 16-year civil war in Liberia. Two families came as Liberian refugees from Ghana, and one family came as Liberian refugees from the Cote D'voire, formerly, the Ivory Coast. Three participants migrated to the U.S. on resettlement programs. They were resettled in the U.S. through two non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Only two participants came directly from Liberia, not as a refugee. One families came on "chain migration." A family member filed for the daughter and her children to come in 2012. The other

family migrated to the U.S. on the diversity visa program. The diversity visa is a lottery program that randomly selects applicants from around the world (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Breakdown of Migration to the Pacific Northwest*

Migration statistics of participants	Number of families
Migrated directly to the Pacific Northwest from Liberia	6
Migrated to the Pacific Northwest from other U.S. States	2
Migrated to the U.S. as refugees	3
Migrated to the U.S. on resettlement programs	3
Migrated to the U.S. on chain-migration	1
Migrated to the U.S. on diversity visa program	1

*Note.* Eight participating families shared the stories of 21 children in U.S. public schools.

The participants worked either in healthcare and/or food services. Three participants were single mothers who worked two jobs. Five participants were two-parent families. Three of the two-parent families had either the father working two jobs and the mother one job or both parents working two jobs. Two families worked opposite shifts, so someone was home when the children were home. Two participants were homeowners while the other six participants were renting a home or apartment units (see Table 3).



Table 3

*Self-reported Socioeconomic Status of Participating Families*

Economic status of participants	Number of families
Low-income families	5
Middle-class families	3
Families working 2 or more jobs	6
Families working opposite shifts for someone to be home with children	2
Homeowners	2
Renting a house or apartment	6

The children attended five public schools in the Pacific Northwest. Stories participants shared came from children in elementary to high schools. The children range in ages from eight to seventeen. Six children were elementary school students, seven were middle school students and eight were high school students. Thirteen of the children are girls and eight are boys (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Demography of the Children Whose Stories Were Shared by Their Parents.*

Categories	Number of children
Children in elementary schools	6
Children in middle schools	7
Children in high schools	8
Girls	13
Boys	8

The children were not interviewed directly for this study. The parents were interviewed and shared stories their children told them. The stories narrated by the parents were second-hand information. It would have been prudent to hear from the children directly. However, this study uncovered perceptions of African immigrant families as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. Engaging parents directly as study's participants was appropriate for two reasons. African immigrant parents have high expectations for their children to succeed in U.S. schools (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013). Immigrant parents developed perceptions about U.S. schools based on what they were told by their children (Goodwin, 2017). To uncover perceptions of African immigrant parents as it related to their children's experiences, it was best to hear directly from the parents. The stories shared by the children were the basis of the perceptions. People make sense of their meaning schemes by reflecting on the subconscious meaning schemes that drive their actions (Morrice, 2013). Allowing parents to narrate stories told them by their children was the best way to uncover meanings African immigrant families attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. schools.

The focus of this study was to uncover meanings African immigrant parents from Liberia attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. Studies revealed uncovering perceptions of parents benefited educators and students. Educators were benefited from insights gained by knowing how parents perceived of them. Students were benefited when educators put proper interventions in place to ease concerns of parents (Cohen-Vogel & Smrekar, 2012).

The participants spoke English at home with their children. English is the official language used in schools in Liberia. There are 16 tribes in Liberia, but everyone speaks English. There are two types of English spoken in Liberia. Liberian English (colloquial) is used for ordinary, regular, day to day interactions. Standard English (British-styled phonics pronunciation

and intonation) is used in schools and official functions. Of the eight participants, only three families spoke another language at home besides English. The other five participants only spoke English at home mostly because the parents were from different tribal groups in Liberia. Since the parents were not from the same tribes, they communicated in English.

None of the participants had a college education. Three of the participating parents had post-high school education but no college degree. Another three participating families had either a father, mother or both parents with a high school diploma. Six participants had a high school diploma or above, but not a full college degree. Two participants did not complete high school. However, the participants value higher education and desire to see their children obtain a college education. The participants are involved with the educational endeavors of their children.

All the participants are religious and have high moral standards and expectations for their children. Six participants were Christians and took their children to church regularly. One participating families had both parents as Muslim. The parents encouraged but did not force their children to attend the mosque. One participating families had the parents as Christian and Muslim. The Christian parent took the children to church and the Muslim parent went to the mosque alone. However, the children were expected to fast and pray during the month of Ramadan. Because of their religious beliefs, the participants expected their children to respect authority and behave properly in school. The participants relied on their faith to motivate and encourage their children to cope with challenges the children encountered in U.S. schools.

Questionnaires, semistructured interviews, and focus group sessions were used to gather raw data from participants. The participants' identities were kept confidential through the omission of names and the specific schools in which the children were enrolled. Instead of

names, the participants are identified in the study as Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, etc.

### **Research Methodology and Analysis**

This dissertation is a qualitative ethnography case study about the experiences of African immigrant students from Liberia in U.S. public schools. The goal of this ethnography case study was to uncover meanings African immigrant parents from Liberia attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. schools. The families shared the individual stories of each child as told to them about the experiences of the students in U.S. public schools.

The participants in this study voluntarily participated in the study. Prior to selecting and contacting participants, I obtained permission from CU-IRB to conduct the research. After I received Approval Letter from CU-IRB, I contacted a nonprofit community-based organization. The organization caters to the welfare of Liberians living in the Pacific Northwest. The leader of the organization presented 60 names of family heads to be invited for participation in the study. The 60 names were written on pieces of paper and placed in a box. After placing the 60 names in a box and mixing them, eight families were randomly selected to be invited for participation in the study.

The leader of the organization called each of the family selected and informed them about their selection to participate in the study. Each family consented to participate in the study. The leader asked each family if he was authorized to give me their personal information for follow up contact. Phone numbers, addresses, and email contacts of the selected families were given to me after the director made initial contact and received indication of the family's desire to be involved in the study.

I called each selected family to schedule an initial home visit as they were awaiting my call. A date and time was agreed upon with each participant based upon the availability of each family. I met each participant at their homes and discussed content of the consent form. Each participant was presented with a copy of the consent form. We went over every statement on the consent form line by line. After I answered the potential participants' questions, each participant signed the consent form. The participants were excited about participating in the study. After signing the consent form, all of the families except one inquired about monetary incentives although they were told over the phone there was no monetary incentive. I explained the study is a requirement for completing my study in the doctoral program at Concordia. Having finally addressed the monetary incentive issue, each participant indicated their willingness to participate in the study. One-on-one, face-to-face semistructured interview times were scheduled to be held at each participant's home at a designated date and time based upon the preference of each participant.

After obtaining consent from each participant to participate in the study, another community-based organization was contacted and provided copy of CU-IRB approval letter. The community-based organization was contacted because their facility was where the focus group sessions for the study were held. Permission was granted by the organization for the focus group sessions to be held at the facility.

Semistructured questions guided the interviews with each participant (see Appendix A). The interviews were recorded as outlined in the consent document. Three families were singled family units with only mothers and children. Five families have both parents, but the mothers shared the stories of their children. Field notes were taken during interactions with participants. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 95 minutes depending on stories the families

shared. Two focus group sessions were held besides the one-on-one, face-to-face interviews. The focus group sessions were held at a community center because it was central to all participants. Seven of the eight families participated in the focus group sessions. The family that did not participate had a family emergency and could not make it for the two days in a row. Three major questions with subquestions guided the focus group sessions (see Appendix B). The first two questions were discussed the first day and the last question the next day. The focus group sessions were held for an hour each.

Participants were given told that they were free to leave at any time if they were uncomfortable for any reason. Everyone stayed and participate in the sessions. On the last day the third question (see Appendix B) was the focus of the session. Participants were prohibited from stating whether their children are doing well academically or not. Participants were asked to speak in general terms because the goal was not to compare the academic performance of their children.

After collecting data from participants, the digital audio recordings were transcribed. I compared my notes with the transcription of the recordings and made corrections where needed. I double-checked everything for accuracy multiple times to ensure I was not missing anything. To ensure the internal validity of the study, I checked with each participant about accuracy of the transcriptions of the recordings. Internal validity is the extent to which the results of a study reflect the true experiences of participants (McMillan, 2012). I met with each participants to review transcripts of the recording for accuracy. Each participant was given a copy of the transcript for review. I read transcripts for two participants who requested the reading of their transcripts. Each participant acknowledged accurate after reviewing the transcripts,. As for the transcripts of the focus group sessions, the participants selected three members to meet with me

because everyone was busy and there was no financial incentive for participating. I met with the representatives of participants in the focus group sessions for 45 minutes to confirm accuracy of the transcript. After reviewing the transcripts, no corrections were made, and accuracy was confirmed.

Once accuracy of all transcripts was confirmed by participants, NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software was used to store, organize, and analyze data. Thematic coding was used in analyzing the data to derive themes and categories that addressed the research questions (Saldaña, 2013; Yin, 2013). Descriptive coding was used to pull facts from the data (Richards & Morse, 2013). Topic coding was used to create a category and analytic coding was used to drill deeper into themes and recognizing extensions of themes to alert me of new themes (Richards & Morse, 2013). All the data were coded to enable inclusion of a vivid, precise description of the setting, and the people in the setting. Coding was used to enhance the process and ability to clearly state meanings participants attached (McMillan, 2012) to the lived experiences of their children in U.S. schools.

Coding the data helped in the establishment of the following categories: challenges reported involving teachers, challenges reported involving peers (fellow students), parents' responses and reactions, the schools' response to the reported experiences and meanings parents attached to the reported experiences. These categories enhanced the analysis of the data by grouping the words and phrases of the texts of the data. The grouping helped with organization, comparison and/or contrasting and the identification of patterns. After grouping the data, identified patterns were sorted and developed into these themes: Common challenges reported, common cultural reactions, and common assumptions or perceptions of families. By sorting identified patterns and developing themes, I identified situations or events that did not fit the

general findings. The events identified involved a specific teacher's approach that did not align with the general approach of teachers.

Since this study was shaped and framed through the lens of social constructivism, the next procedure in analyzing data was relating patterns and/or findings to the theory of social constructivism. The patterns or themes connected or related to social constructivism were common challenges reported, common cultural reactions, and common assumptions or perceptions of families. By relating the themes to social constructivism, I uncovered how the families minimized negative factors and cleave to values that made them productive and successful in U.S. schools.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The primary research question that guided this study was, "What are African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. schools?" The purpose of this study was to uncover meanings African immigrant parents from Liberia attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. public schools. Eight families from Liberia shared the individual stories of 21 children as told to them about the experiences of the children in U.S. public schools. Besides the primary research question, four open-ended subquestions helped capture meanings African immigrant parents attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools.

The data revealed consistent gratitude among all participants regarding educators in U.S. schools. The participants in this study perceived educators as being supportive, respectful, and caring about the academic success of African immigrant students. Although participants expressed educators are supportive, some participants felt educators only acted when confronted by parents. Other participants expressed frustration about the inability of educators in U.S.



schools to exercise authority over students. The participants perceived U.S. educators as weak because their authority over students is minimum.

The primary challenge reported by immigrant students from Liberia was peer-based. The challenges involving peers were mostly teasing, and bullying. All eight participants shared stories of how their children were teased or bullied by peers in U.S. schools. There were challenges reported involving teachers, but those challenges were effectively addressed. The participants shared examples of how teachers expressed empathy and took positive actions to help African immigrant children succeed. However, one common theme was the perception that U.S. schools treat immigrant girls better than boys.

### **Presentation of the Data and Results**

The results presented are based on thematic analysis of the data. The findings are based on these five categories: challenges reported involving teachers, challenges reported involving peers (fellow students), parents' responses and reactions, the schools' response to the reported experiences, and meanings parents attached to the reported experiences.

#### **Challenges Reported Involving Teachers**

The participants reported teachers were supportive and motivated their children to succeed academically. However, five participants shared what they described as initially challenges their children had with teachers in U.S. public schools. During the analysis, the challenges involving teachers were classified as (a) pace of speaking, (b) process issues, and (c) lack of interest.

#### **Pace of Speaking**

Although people from Liberia, West Africa spoke English, the pronunciation of words differed slightly from the Americans. All the participants reported their children experienced

difficulties initially understanding their teachers when they first entered U.S. public schools. The challenge was due to the pace at which teachers spoke and how words were pronounced. One participating father explained the challenge this way.

You know, when our oldest daughter came to the U.S., she had difficulties initially in school because she couldn't understand her teachers. Although she spoke English in school in Liberia, and we do speak English to them here at home, the pronunciations were different.

A mother who participated in the study described the challenge as followed:

When my daughter was in the seventh grade, she used to come home complaining she couldn't understand anything her teachers were saying. She used to cry and say, 'mama, I want to do well in school, but I can't understand some of my teachers.' She was doing great academically in school in Liberia. She was an honor roll student. Now she is here worrying she might not make it because she cannot understand her teachers.

### **Process Issues**

U.S. public schools have a process in place about late attendance to class. This process was a challenge to immigrant students from Liberia when they first entered U.S. schools. In Liberia, students are in stationery classes and teachers go from class to class. When immigrant students from Liberia entered U.S. schools, it took a while for them to get adjusted to the new system. Participant C shared her frustration about the process at U.S. schools as followed:

You know, my daughter is in the eighth grade. Sometimes when my daughter comes from school, she complains some teachers said she was late and could not sit in their classes because it took her a while to get to the next class. The classes are far apart, and my

daughter has to walk from class to class. It is not like Liberia, where the teachers are the ones walking from class to class.

Another process issue that came up was placement of students. All the parents reported placement of students helped their children. However, one participant reported placing her daughter at the end of the semester did not help and caused stress to her daughter. Participant D described the frustration and stress the placement caused her daughter as followed:

My daughter is now in the ninth grade. When she was in the seventh grade, her teacher placed her in another class almost at the end of the semester. Although the teacher told my daughter the placement was good for her, my daughter was very stressed about the placement. My daughter was doing well in her classes. She felt the placement would cause her to fail. When she was transferred, she told her teacher she didn't want to go to the new class because she might not pass the class, but the teacher did not listen to her. And guess what, she failed the class. She used to cry and worry. The next semester, the school transferred her back to her old class, and she passed that class.

Participant E also shared how placing her daughter was not working. Participant E described the challenge her daughter had with placement as followed:

The only challenge my daughter reported when she was in the 10th grade was placing her in a Spanish class. My daughter signed up for the French class but later she reported the French teacher didn't want her in his class. The reason the French teacher gave is my daughter speaks French fluently. You know, we were refugees from Liberia in Guinea for a while during the war before coming to the U.S. Although she speaks French, she wanted to learn more about the French language. She speaks English and still takes English classes so why not French. She did not want to take Spanish but was place in

Spanish class. She would come home crying she will fail because she does not want to learn Spanish. Because of the worry, crying, and fear of failing, we went to the school. During the meeting, the French teacher kept telling us she does not need to take French. The school ultimately place her with another French teacher.

### **Lack of Interest**

The attitudes of a few teachers were interpreted by participants as a lack of interest in the well-being of their children. Studies highlighted teachers demonstrated low expectations as it related to the academic ability and achievements of immigrant students (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Because of low expectation teachers demonstrated, children of immigrants encountered substantial negative consequences that undermined their progress in the educational system (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Some stories shared demonstrated teachers still have low expectations for immigrant student's academic performance. The participants viewed the teachers' behaviors as a lack of interest in the academic success of their children.

Participant A shared the experience of her daughter with the seventh grade science teacher. The daughter is now in the ninth grade.

Our daughter will come home complaining about her science teacher. She will tell us the science teacher did not want her in the class. She complained the science teacher did not allow her to ask questions in class. We went to the school and meet with the science teacher. When we met the science teacher, she told us our daughter is not doing well in her class. We asked the science teacher how she could help our daughter? The science teacher just didn't care and had no interest in helping our daughter. She told us she doesn't know what she can do to help. How can you call yourself a teacher and don't know what you need to do to help a child who wants to do well in your class?

Participant F described the attitude of another teacher as followed:

My son complained about his math teacher when he was in the 10th grade. He said whenever he raised his hands in class to ask questions, his Math teacher does not recognize him. He did not want to speak without been recognized although other students were speaking without putting up their hands. When he approached his teacher initially about the teacher not paying attention to him, the math teacher seems to show no interest in what my son was experiencing. After my son complained many times, we went to the school and talk to somebody. That teacher did not care from my perspective about the academic success of my child because my child is an African immigrant. I am sure if my son was White, the teacher would have paid attention to him and helped him.

### **Challenges Reported Involving Peers (Fellow Students)**

The primary challenge reported by immigrant students from Liberia was peer-based. The challenges involving peers were teasing, bullying, and the trauma of gun threats in schools. The eight participating families shared stories of how their children were teased or bullied by peers in U.S. schools. Two participants shared how their children were traumatized because other students took guns to schools, although the guns were never used.

Participant A shared the serious negative experience of her children being teased by their peers. Participant A shared her children did not have friends at schools because of teasing and bullying. The mother stated, “My oldest daughter is in high school. She tells us some girls are always making fun of her. Right now, she doesn’t have any friends because of how mean the girls are in her school.”

Participant B shared her children have been teased and bullied since they enrolled in schools:

Two years ago, when my daughter was in the sixth grade, I came home from work and saw her crying in her room. When I asked her why she was crying, she told me the children in her class laughed at her every day in school. She told me the children laughed at her because she has pimples on her face. She did not want to go back to school. When she was in the seventh grade, she was teased about her hair. She used to cry about her hair.

On being bullied, Participant B shared her son was bullied both in the classroom and on the school bus. When Participant B was speaking about her son being bullied, she was emotional. She paused between her comments, her voice quivered, and her eyes were teary. Below are some stories Participant B shared.

My son who is in the second grade came home one day with his mouth swollen. When I asked, he said another student hit him on the school bus. . . . My son came home one day and told me a White student called him “Black nigger” in the class. My son was so mad about being called such a name he started hitting the chair because I told him not to ever hit anyone. The next day, the boy called him the same name again. My son got upset and hit the chair in the class. Three days later, my son came home and told me the same boy called him the same name again. Just imagine an eight years old boy being called such a name.

Participant C shared:

For the first week in school, my son came home crying each day and didn’t want to go to school the next day because he was teased by the children. He complained the children laughed at him because he didn’t pronounce words clearly as they did.

Participant D narrated:

My daughter is now in the ninth grade. When we came here, she was in the fourth grade. She used to come home crying, “I am not going to school anymore. Can you please change my school? the girls are teasing me every day.”

Participant E shared her son was often bullied and jumped when he first entered U.S. public schools. She stated,

When my son was in the sixth grade, he came home and told me there was a fight in his class. He said some White boys (students) jumped him to fight for no reason, telling him to go back to Africa.

Participant F narrated her daughter came home from school crying. She said,

The other girls, when I go to school will laugh at me. They tell me “your shoe is ugly. Your clothes are ugly, and your hair is rough. I tried avoiding them, but they just keep making fun of me.”

Participant G emotionally shared her daughter was lonely and sad most of the time after she started school. The mother shared,

After about two months or so, I came home one day and saw my daughter crying in her room. When she saw me, she pretended she was not crying. I asked her what happened. At first, she was hesitant to tell me. After I kept questioning her, she told me the children in her class were laughing at her hair, shoes, and clothes.

Participant H also shared the agony of her son as he was bullied and teased. The participant shared she used to volunteer at her son’s school because she was not working yet. The husband was working, the children at school, and she was lonely at home. Her family had just migrated and did not know a lot of people. Her son used to beg her to stop volunteering at

the school. When she and the dad asked the son why he did not want his mom to volunteer at the school, he said,

Every time you volunteered at the school, the children in my class teased me about how you dressed and talked. “Mom, please stop coming to my school to volunteer, please.” I told him I enjoyed my times volunteering. He cried more and said, “mom, my friends were laughing at me today because they couldn’t understand you.” He said one student kept following him saying, “your mom can’t speak good English just like you.”

Challenges faced by immigrant students from Liberia were not only teasing and bullying, they were traumatized when their peers brought guns to schools. Although no one was shot in their schools, immigrant children were traumatized because they came out of war zones in Liberia. Two participants narrated how their children reacted when guns were seen on other students in schools. Participant C shared her son was traumatized because a student brought a toy gun to school.

One day I got a call from the school telling me my son was crying and in the office. I was asked to come over and talk to him to calm down. I asked the school what happened. The teacher who called said one of the students brought a toy gun to school. The next day my son came from school crying again. He told me he will not go back to school. When I asked him why, he said because the boy who brought the toy gun to school will kill him.

Participant A shared her oldest daughter came home and said the school was locked down because a student brought gun to school. She said nothing happened and the student never used the gun or attempted to use the gun. She said the mother of the boy who brought the gun to school, when she realized her gun was missing, called the school and told the administration her son took her gun and had it with him in school. The school was put in lockdown and the gun was



taken away from the boy. This incident traumatized the girl to where she was afraid to sleep.

Participant A shared,

Our daughter was afraid when she came home. She was crying and saying, “Mama, we came from a war zone and people want to be shooting in school?” My daughter was afraid to sleep. We were concerned she would have a nightmare about her encounter in Liberia during the war, although she saw little of the war. The stories she heard and the way we lived in Liberia should be behind her. She shouldn’t be afraid of her safety in this country, especially in school.

### **Responses and Reactions of Parents**

How did parents of immigrant children from Liberia respond and react to the reported experiences of their children in U.S. schools? Multiple studies emphasized parental involvement in the education of their children could lead to high academic achievement (Tan, 2012). As parents engaged their children at home, they could motivate the children in various ways to succeed in school (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014). How did immigrant parents from Liberia engage and motivate their children to succeed in schools?

When Participant A’s daughter complained she could not understand her teachers, the parents engaged the school to seek help for their daughter. The mother explained their response and reactions as followed:

We went to the school and had a meeting with the principal and counselor. During the meeting, I suggested my daughter be dropped one grade and placed in the sixth grade for her to gradually catch up in understanding the teachers and her fellow students.

In addition to meeting with administrators at the school, the parents shared their personal stories to provide emotional support to their daughter. Participant A shared,

When my daughter was struggling to understand her teachers, I told my daughter I could not understand any American English when I first came to this country. I told my daughter I had to take English classes before starting the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program. By telling my daughter I had a similar experience and took classes to overcome, I provided encouragement, motivation, and emotional support to my daughter.

When Participant A's daughter was traumatized because a student came to school with a gun, the parents reacted, stating,

We went to the school and met with the principal. We told the principal about our concerns. We shared our experiences of the war we went through in our homeland for which we came to this country. We told the school administration we were separated for a while from our daughter because of the war. We came to the U.S. without her. Now that she is here when she sees someone with a gun, she is afraid she would be separated from us again.

When Participant C's son was traumatized because a student brought a toy gun to school, the parents also went to the school. Participant C explained to the school why her son was traumatized by the toy gun and took actions to make him feel safe. Participant C states,

I told the school my son was crying and afraid because he came from a war zone and wanted nothing to do with guns, toy or not. I went over to the school and picked him up for the day. I went with him to the school the next day. I shared with the counselor it's okay to allow him to cry for a while because we all did that in Liberia whenever we heard the sound of guns. At home, we assured him we are all safe. We allowed him to sleep with us in our room for few days. We took him to school for a week. After a week, he was back to his jovial and playful self.

As for being teased and bullied, all the participants reported not feeling sorry for their children. The participants reported telling their children to be strong because life is full of challenges. Participant D's statement below summed up the comments participants shared with me.

As parents, we should never dismiss what our children tell us. But we should not have a pity party with them. We need to raise children who are emotionally strong in this country if we want them to succeed in life. Our children will have more challenges in the future while they are in this country. If they are not strong emotionally now, they will not make it. So, what I do to motivate them and empower them is to listen to what they have to tell me. When they complain about anything at school, I asked them questions to help me understand and not jump to conclusions. But I will tell them to be tough. If someone thinks that you will not succeed, make them know you are strong by succeeding. I tell my children to do everything with their best efforts. I tell them, if you are going to make it in this country, you must do everything better than the people in your age group.

### **U.S. Schools' Response to the Reported Experiences**

Educators are agents of change. This portion of the study's findings highlights how educators responded to the experiences of immigrant students from Liberia. All the participants reported the schools took appropriate actions to help their children adapt to English in the U.S. When participant A's daughter could not understand the teachers, the parents requested she be dropped a grade lower. How did the school respond? According to Participant A,

The principal refused to drop our daughter a grade lower and promised the school will work with our daughter to adjust to how people speak here in the U.S. Our daughter was placed in a special program to help her adjust to understanding her teachers and friends

and to do well in school. When the school put our daughter in the special program, she told us the teacher in the special program spent extra time with her to understand pronunciations and communicate properly. Now my daughter can speak just like she was born here. She has no problem understanding her teachers now. Although our daughter struggled a little in the seventh grade because of the lack of understanding, we are glad she made it through the seventh grade with mostly B<sup>+</sup> and A<sup>+</sup>. Our daughter attributes her success to her teachers. She always says she would not have done well in school if the teachers were not supportive.

When Participant A's daughter was struggling with science and her teacher seemed not to care, the school placed her with another teacher. Participant A shared,

Our daughter told us her new teacher spent extra time with her, helping her understand her science lesson. Our daughter completed her eighth grade class with a B<sup>+</sup> in science.

Participant B shared her daughter was motivated by her teachers to stay focused when she was teased by her peers. Participant B stated,

The English teacher can make my daughter feel better when the children teased her.

Besides the English teacher, the computer and science teachers are always encouraging my daughter. My daughter tells me the Science teacher always pays special attention to her. The science teacher encouraged my daughter to stay after school to go over her lessons with her. The computer teacher allows my daughter to spend extra time on the computer to do schoolwork because we don't have a computer at home. My daughter says her English teacher has really encouraged her. The English teacher spent time with my daughter and tells my daughter she is smart and should allow no one to lead her astray. Whenever I go to her school, the English teacher always tells me my daughter is

smart, quiet, corporative, obedient, and caring. Whenever I heard the teacher speaks of my daughter like that, I feel so happy.

Participant E shared during the month of Ramadan, their children were provided safe space to leave class and pray. Participant E (both parents are from Muslim backgrounds although the mother is now a Christian) expressed appreciation for how the school supports the students. Although the father did not force his children to go to the mosque, he required that they pray during Ramadan. Participant E shared they never approached the school about their children's faith. The participants shared why they think a particular public school supports the students as they do.

The high school is so diverse the school provides a safe space for the children to practice their faith. Muslims students can pray in a secured and safe environment where no one will harass them, and Christian students are given the same safe space. I am Christian and my husband is Muslim. When it's prayer time for Muslim kids, the school allows them to pray and then come back to class.

Participant H shared her younger daughter was succeeded in school because the school provided second chances. Participant H stated,

My younger daughter also shared with me the school gives her a second chance. For example, when she gets a B or a C in a class, the teacher can let her retake the test until she gets an A in the class. Because of the possibility to retake a test, my daughter is grateful. You know she is not as smart as her older sister. She takes time to understand. Her sister gets everything the first time but for her, it takes a while. She is really grateful for the second chance her teachers do give to make up grades.

Participant G shared her shy, secluded, and quiet daughter is now active in school because of the support system. Her daughter is now in the 11th grade. The mother shared how the support system in the public school motivated her daughter to become active and successful academically.

My second daughter used to be very quiet, shy, and seclusive when we first came to the U.S. The school assigned her a counselor who worked with her to get over her fear of others. The counselor even encouraged my daughter to participate in activities. Now, she is playing basketball and participating in track and field. For her to stay on the basketball and track and field teams, she has to maintain a better grade. That is an encouragement to my daughter to focus on her grades. The school system has really helped my children.

The participants credited U.S. schools with the success of their children academically. However, participants with both sons and daughters in U.S. public schools expressed their girls were treated better than their boys. Participant B expressed this sentiment forcefully.

When my girls have problems, the teachers are quick to respond. The girls are treated better than the boys and I don't understand. Maybe it's because most teachers are women and they want the girls to succeed. Every time my son complained, and I informed the teachers, nothing is done. When it is my daughter, I get a quick response. Let me give you an example. My son was bullied and jumped by some students. I went to the school and was told they will check the camera where the incident took place and get back to me. I waited for one week and no one called me from the school to tell me anything.

When I went back, I was told they have not checked the camera yet. I was told the principal will call me but up to this day, no one has called me to tell me what happened and what the school did about it.

## **Meanings Parents Attached to the Reported Experiences**

This study uncovered meanings African immigrant parents from Liberia attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. schools. During the one-on-one, face-to-face, semistructured interviews, participants were asked about meanings they attached to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. Although analysis of the data gave a larger perspective based upon themes, below are direct quotations about how participants felt about U.S. public schools based on the experiences of their children and personal interactions with U.S. schools.

Participant A stated,

As parents, we think the public-school system here in the U.S. is a blessing to us. We don't have to worry about uniform and lunch for our children. We don't have to pay school fees and buy books like back home in Liberia. Everything is provided for the children. The support our children are receiving will prepare them for college.

Participant B expressed frustration about her son being treated differently than her daughters.

I feel like the schools treat girls better than boys. When my son had problems, the teachers did not take his problems seriously. I told the teachers if my son has been White or a girl, they would have given him more attention. For me, I feel like if the children have no one to talk for them, the schools will not protect them from other children. We need to protect our children so they can feel safe and happy to go to school every day and give their best efforts to lessons teachers are teaching them.

Participant C expressed children are neglected if parents are not involved.

The stories my children tell me and the response from the schools are encouraging. My children are doing well in school because of positive experiences they have. Although there were some bad experiences, but the way the schools addressed the situation made a

good and positive impact on my children's success in school. The main perception I have is the U.S. schools' administrators and teachers only pay attention to our children when we are involved. It shouldn't be that way. Some of us work two to three jobs and don't have the time to be on the school campus every time.

Participant D thinks speaking up would get the children in trouble.

The public-school system is good. Our children can eat breakfast and lunch for free while at school. Back home (Liberia), we have to buy books and uniforms. But here in the U.S. schools, we don't have to buy uniforms and books. Sometimes, we are given free school supplies. Some teachers are really great with the students, but some don't care.

Sometimes we want to talk, to address those issues but we are afraid to talk. We are afraid to talk because we don't want to get in trouble or for our children to get in trouble.

The teachers need to take time to talk to our children. I think some teachers treat Black children differently than White students.

Participant E viewed educators as respectful and polite to parents.

My perception is teachers and administrators are very respectful and polite to us as parents. They make you feel comfortable. They are not rude or arrogant around parents.

They listened to us when we tell them about the experiences of our children. But I think it is not a good thing for teachers not to exercise authority over the children. They have our children more than we do during school time. Why do they have to call us for everything? Why can't they discipline the children and let the children come home and tell us? I think they should stop calling us for every simple thing, but I know they will continue to call us and do nothing because that is how they operate in this culture.

Participant F expressed gratitude for after school programs.



Honestly, I think there are good people in the schools but there are bad teachers also. I think some teachers made up their minds that African immigrant students cannot do well and are not willing to help. I think the public-school system is great. I like the after-school programs. I like how the teachers in the after-school programs help our children to understand their lessons. The teachers in the after-school programs even helped the children to do their homeworks. For me, the after schoolteachers that helped our children to succeed are heroes. Then you have the teachers who spend extra time with the children. I think majority of teachers are there to help our children succeed in school and I bless God for them.

Participant G perceived educators as being too slow to act.

For me, I think some of the teachers are like turtles. Like the Liberian parable, if you don't put fire on the back of the turtle, it will not move fast. If your child is complaining, the teachers will do nothing until you show up as a parent. I think every parent should find time to engage the schools if their children are complaining. If you don't put fire on the teachers, they will do nothing to help the children succeed academically. But to be fair, some teachers are exceptional. They will do everything to help our children academically.

Participant H expressed that most teachers are good and will always do what is right.

You know what, there are good people who will do what is right no matter what. I think most teachers are good people. I think some teachers do not like us Africans. But the good teachers will always do what is right no matter what. The way I feel is when you can't speak good English, the people in the school don't respect you. But you know what, there are good people who will do what is right no matter what.

The eight families who participated in the study shared the stories of 21 children. Based on the stories of their children's experiences and the parents' interactions with educators, they had positive perceptions of U.S. schools. As highlighted in the quotes above, all the participants shared the schools took appropriate actions to address their children's needs. Some felt educators are respectful and polite to parents. Others expressed gratitude for after school programs and perceived of most teachers as good and doing what is right. Although the families expressed gratitude, they also expressed some concerns. Some of the concerns were: their sons are treated differently than their daughters, immigrant children are neglected if parents are not involved, speaking up would get their children in trouble, and educators as being too slow to act.

### **Other Findings**

Focusing solely on the perspectives of the participants enhanced analysis of the data and led to other findings. The words and phrases of the texts of the data were grouped to enhance analysis of the data. The grouping helped with organization, comparison and/or contrasting and identification of patterns. After grouping the data, identified patterns were sorted and developed into the following themes: Common challenges reported, common cultural reactions, and common assumptions or perceptions of families. The remaining findings are divided into these subsections: sociocultural stressors encountered by African immigrant students, cultural conflicts between U.S. schools and African immigrant families, role parental involvement played in minimizing sociocultural stressors to help immigrant children succeed in U.S. schools, and educators' response to sociocultural stressors affecting African immigrant students. Each subsections includes themes from identified patterns in the codes.

## **Sociocultural Stressors Encountered by African Immigrant Students**

An analysis of the data regarding sociocultural stressors faced by African immigrant students revealed the following top two stressors. All eight participants reported teasing or bullying by peers as the most challenging stressors encountered by African immigrant students. African immigrant students reported to their parents that peers often laughed at them because of heavy accent and/or hair textures. Because of been laughed at, the children reported they were afraid to speak up in class and/or ask questions if they did not understand a concept or material presented by teachers. Participant E described the challenge as followed:

My son used to talk a lot. After we moved here and he enrolled in school, he spoke less and became to withdraw. During the teacher-parent conference, the teacher told us our son is too shy and doesn't speak out in class. My son told us everyone usually laughed at him whenever he speaks. He says even some teachers do giggle when he speaks but pretend like they are not laughing at him. Because he is afraid they will laugh at him, he doesn't participate or ask questions in class.

Besides been teased, five participants reported not understanding teachers initially was a stressor for their children in U.S. schools. The parents reported their children came home crying because they could not understand their teachers and were afraid they would perform poorly academically. The primary reason for the lack of understanding was not because the children could not speak English. English is the official language in Liberia and everyone from Liberia speaks British and/or colloquial English. The challenge, however, was with intonation and pronunciation. The students felt teachers were speaking too fast and they could not understand what the teachers were saying. One student reported to her parents when she first entered U.S. schools,

The teachers were pronouncing almost every word differently. I found it difficult to follow the explanation of the teachers. When I asked the other students sitting next to me, who also was an African immigrant, she said she too did not understand the teachers. I wished I had a recorder to record the teachers and have someone explain to me later.

### **Cultural Conflicts Between U.S. Schools and African Immigrant Families**

Data about cultural conflicts revealed all eight participating families asked multiple times why teachers had to call parents about everything their children did at schools? The parents shared their frustration about getting calls from schools their children were late for class. Culturally, in Liberia, when a student arrived at school, parents are only called for major behaviors. If a student is late in Liberia, the student bears the consequences of being late. Parents are not called for students being late. When a student misbehaved in class, the student is disciplined without calling the parents. When African immigrant parents first arrived in the U.S. and were called for everything, they were confused. Participants reported they discussed calling them with teachers but were told that was the policy. Participant C stated,

The schools have our children more than we do on school days. Why can't the schools just discipline the children like they do in Liberia? Why do they call us when the children are late? Don't they have consequences for the children when they are late?

Three participants complained having told the schools not to call them for minor issues, they were still getting called. One participant expressed her frustration as follows:

I told the school my daughter was getting adjusted to finding her classes. You know, in Liberia, it is teachers who go from class to class. Here the children go from class to class. Can you imagine a new student who thinks teachers will come to your class? Now, while my daughter was trying to find her way to each class, I kept getting calls every day she

was late for class or missed a class. Do you think I will take calls from the school seriously the day my daughter did not show up for class? I will think she was a few minutes late and here they are calling me again. The schools need to stop calling parents for children been late to class.

### **Role Parental Involvement Played in Minimizing Sociocultural Stressors**

The data analysis on parental involvement showed parents engaged the schools for every complaint from their children except for some complaints about being teased or bullied. Because parents engaged the schools, sociocultural stressors were minimized. For example, five participants reported their children could not understand their teachers initially. When their parents engaged the schools, the children were assigned special classes to help them cope with pronunciations and intonations. The students were also placed in classes to read with comprehension. Because of the special placements, the students got adjusted and performed well academically.

Three participants reported engaging the school for teasing and/or bullying. All participants reported spending times with their children and encouraging them. The data showed parents spoke positively to their children and told them they (the children) were special and unique. One participant told her daughter, “The girls are laughing at you because they are jealous. You have the best hair texture and they will never match yours.”

The participant reported her daughter was proud of her hair texture and told other girls they have poor hair textures. The girls stopped laughing at her, and she was not teased anymore about her hair texture. By engaging their children, parents motivated children to minimize negative stressors and succeeded academically.

## **Educators' Response to Sociocultural Stressors Impacting African Immigrant Students**

Data analysis revealed teachers expressed empathy and took positive actions to help African immigrant children succeed. When African immigrant children struggled to understand teachers and comprehend materials, they were placed in special classes. When students were struggling with a particular subject, teachers spent extra time with them until they got the concepts and did well academically. Six participants revealed their children are performing well academically because of special attention given by teachers. Three participants reported their children were struggling academically. Because teachers paid special attention to the children, they are honored students now. Participants shared how some teachers stayed after school to help African immigrant students. One participant, however, while praising teachers, expressed her daughters were treated with respect and dignity when they complained than her son by teachers. The participant reported whenever her daughter had a challenge, teachers would spend extra time until she improved. However, whenever her son had a challenge, teachers always came up with an excuse to avoid spending extra time with him.

The data analysis also showed teachers wrote notes home to parents whenever the children did exceptionally well in class. One participant said, "The notes served as motivation for children to behave well at school and do well in their lessons. The notes shew teachers care and reward good behaviors." In addition to notes, children in elementary school told their parents teachers always gave them responsibilities in class. Another participant stated, "By giving them responsibilities, the children felt they were important." Because of how teachers interacted with the students, the parents felt the schools valued their children.

## **Summary**

Chapter 4 explained methodology employed in conducting this study. Description of sample was explained along with research methodology. Data sources and methods used to access and/or gather data were explained. The process for participants' selection including sampling procedures and reasons were explained. The findings of the study were summarized and analyzed data presented in an organized manner to provide reader with detailed and synthesized findings. Chapter 4 also laid the groundwork for presentation, evaluation, and discussion of study findings in Chapter 5. The perspectives and voices of participants in this qualitative ethnography case study did guide the discussion in Chapter 5. The voices of participants guided the connections between what this research might mean to educators. The perspectives of participants helped to fill the gaps in the literature, and the confirmation or addition of new knowledge to the scholarly community.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

Africans have migrated to the U.S. in larger numbers since the 1990s, to escape wars, constant conflicts, and poverty for a better life (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013). When African immigrant families migrate to the U.S., they link prospects for achieving the American dream to the educational success of their children. Between 2000 to 2012, over 60,000 African immigrants annually entered the U.S. legally with the dream of having their children obtain quality education in U.S. schools (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013). However, adjusting to the educational system in the U.S. is a challenge for African immigrant families (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013). Upon arrival in the U.S., the quest for quality education is undermined. Multiple sociocultural stressors negatively affect the educational experiences of immigrant children (Bryan & Morrison, 2014; Ford, 2012; Hibel & Jasper, 2012).

Parents of African immigrant children have high expectations for their children to succeed in U.S. schools (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013; Ford, 2012). For African immigrant parents, the American dream is attainable when their children succeed in U.S. schools (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013). Yet there is an absence of the voices of African immigrants in U.S. public schools (Adair, 2014). Challenges immigrant students face in U.S. public schools cannot be solved without input from their families and communities (Lowenhaupt, 2014). This study gives voice to African immigrant families in U.S. public schools. This study examined perceptions of African immigrant parents as it related to the experiences of their children in U.S. schools.

This qualitative ethnography case study uncovered meanings African immigrant families from Liberia, West Africa attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. The focus was on hearing stories the children told their parents about their experiences in U.S. public schools.



This chapter summarizes results of this study. This chapter provides a discussion of the results, and a discussion of the results in relation to the literature. Limitations of the study are explained along with implications of the results for practice. Recommendations for further research are given. The chapter ends with practical suggestions to help African immigrants adapt and succeed in U.S. schools.

### **Summary of the Results**

This qualitative ethnography case study was conducted in an urban metropolitan city in the Pacific Northwest. The purpose of this study was to uncover meanings African immigrant parents from Liberia attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. public schools. Eight families from Liberia shared the individual stories of 21 children as told to them about the experiences of the children in U.S. public schools. The primary research question that guided this study was, “What are African immigrant families’ perceptions of their children’s experiences in U.S. schools?” Besides the primary research question, four open-ended subquestions helped capture meanings African immigrant parents attached to their children’s experiences in U.S. schools.

This study provided the platform for the voices of African immigrant families to be heard. Semistructured questions guided interviews with each participant. Two focus group sessions were held along with one-on-one, face-to-face interviews. The focus group sessions provided the forum for participants to speak about shared experiences of their children in U.S. public schools. After checking with participants to ensure the data reflected the lived experiences of their children, NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software was used to store, organize, and analyze the data.

The primary challenge reported by immigrant students from Liberia was peer-based. The challenges involving peers were teasing, bullying, and the trauma of gun threats in U.S. schools. All eight participants shared stories of how their children were teased or bullied by peers in U.S. schools. Participants also shared challenges their children had with teachers in U.S. public schools and how those issues were addressed. The participants shared many examples of how teachers expressed empathy and took positive actions to help African immigrant children succeed.

After narrating the stories of their children's experiences in U.S. schools, the participants shared meanings they attached to their children's experiences. The four open-ended subresearch questions played a pivotal role in uncovering the meanings participants attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. The primary research question and subquestions were a guide in setting the parameter for this study. The primary research question guided the development of the interview and focus group questions. Below is a detailed discussion of the study findings.

### **Discussion of the Results**

The unique perspectives of participants in this study were uncovered by listening to the stories their children told them about their experiences in U.S. schools. The words of participants are used to share meanings African immigrant families from Liberia attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. The results of the data revealed consistent gratitude among all participants regarding educators in U.S. schools. The participants generally perceived U.S. public schools as being supportive. The gratitude expressed by the participants was based on both stories shared by their children and individual interactions with U.S. schools in the Pacific Northwest. The consensus among participants in this study was educators are supportive,

respectful, and appropriately react when confronted by African immigrant parents about their children's experiences in U.S. schools. However, participants were concerned some teachers seem not to care about the success of African immigrant students. Nonetheless, the study participants acknowledged most teachers do care about the academic success of African immigrant students.

This study was shaped and framed through the lens of social constructivism. One procedure in analyzing data was relating patterns and/or findings to the theory of social constructivism. Patterns or themes connected or related to social constructivism were common challenges reported, common cultural reactions, and common assumptions or perceptions of families. By relating themes to social constructivism, I uncovered how African immigrant families from Liberia minimized negative factors and cleaved to values that made their children productive and successful in U.S. schools.

African immigrant families minimized negative stressors by listening to their children and engaging educators with an open mind and respect. The data showed African immigrant parents engaged U.S. schools for every complaint from their children except for some complaints about being teased or bullied. Because African immigrant parents engaged U.S. schools, sociocultural stressors were minimized. For example, five participants reported their children could not understand their teachers initially. When these parents engaged the schools, their children were assigned to special classes that helped them cope with pronunciations and intonations. The students were also placed in classes to read with comprehension. Because of the special placements, African immigrant students got adjusted and performed well academically.

As for being teased and bullied, participants reported not feeling sorry for their children. Of the eight participants, only three reported engaging U.S. schools for teasing and/or bullying.

All eight participants reported spending times with their children and encouraging them when bullied. The data showed parents spoke positively to their children, emphasizing their special and unique personalities and qualities. The participants reported telling their children to be strong because life is full of challenges. Whenever their children were discouraged, the participants shared personal challenges to motivate their children to succeed academically.

The data showed African immigrant parents motivated their children at home by listening and sharing personal stories. African immigrant parents engaged educators with the challenges encountered by their children, serving as advocates. Most importantly, the data uncovered meanings African immigrant parents from Liberia attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. schools. The participants generally perceived educators are supportive. The participant expressed gratitude about the supportive behaviors of educators. Participants shared that after-school teachers spent valuable time with their children. Participants shared educators are respectful when engaged or confronted by parents. The statement of Participant F captured the sentiment expressed by each participant.

The administrators and teachers are very supportive. My perception is teachers and administrators are very respectful and polite to us as parents. They listened to us when we tell them about the experiences of our children. The after-school teachers spent valuable time with the children. I like how teachers in the after-school programs help our children to understand their lessons. Teachers in after-school programs even helped our children to do their homeworks. For me, the after schoolteachers are heroes. Then you have teachers who spend extra time with the children. My children are succeeding academically because of how supportive teachers are, especially after schoolteachers.

While all participant expressed educators are supportive, five of the participants shared they felt educators only acted when confronted by parents. The participants expressed their frustration about the inability of educators in U.S. schools to discipline their children. The participants perceived U.S. schools as a place where students have too much freedom and educators have no authority over the students. The participants shared many examples that led to this perception. Participant C expressed this perception forcefully.

The main perception I have is U.S. schools' administrators and teachers are stripped of all authority over the children. The children are rude and disrespectful, and teachers have no power to exercise discipline. It shouldn't be that way. The schools have our children more than we do weekdays. You know in Liberia, teachers have the power to discipline. Our children are not mischievous in school in Liberia. Here is a different story. I wish teacher had more authority over the children.

Another perception of African immigrant families uncovered in this study is U.S. schools treat immigrant girls better than boys. The participants shared the stories of 21 children in U.S. schools. The children attended five public schools in the Pacific Northwest. Stories participants shared came from children in elementary to high schools. Six children were elementary school students, seven were middle school students and eight were high school students. Thirteen of the children are girls and eight are boys. The stories shared by participants reflected the experiences of three girls and three boys in elementary schools; four girls and three boys in middle schools, and six girls and two boys in high schools. Three participants had both boys and girls attending U.S. public schools in the Pacific Northwest. The three participants shared their daughters were treated better than their boys. Participant B expressed this sentiment as followed.

The schools treat girls better than boys. I have three boys and two girls in the schools. I appreciate how my girls are treated with dignity and respect. But I cannot understand why my boys are treated different. Our boys are not beasts. The teachers need to pay the same level of attention to our boys as they do our girls.

In conclusion, the results of the data showed African immigrant families have a positive perception of U.S. schools about being supportive to help immigrant students succeed academically. While African immigrant families perceived U.S. schools as been supportive academically, parents with both girls and boys have the perception that girls are treated better than boys. The results of the data also showed African immigrant families have sympathy for educators because of the perception that U.S. schools stripped educators of authority to discipline students. Having discussed the results of the research question, the next section will discuss the results to the literature.

### **Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature**

Immigrant groups in U.S. public schools have been extensively studied by education researchers. A literature review of challenges faced by immigrant students produced multiple distinct descriptors, from the perspectives of immigrant students, school administrators, teachers, and school counselors. Multiple studies found the educational experiences of immigrant students were negatively affected by sociocultural factors (Ford, 2012). Understanding the sociocultural factors of immigrant students led to sensitivity and culturally relevant teaching that increased student's success (Goodwin, 2017). Early interventions were applied to help immigrant students adapt to the new culture and succeed in school (Norris, 2014). Understanding sociocultural challenges faced by immigrant children was essential in helping immigrant students adapt and succeed in school (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014).

Some studies emphasized the need for educators to avoid racial stigma and stereotypes that affected a child's self-concept, leading to poor academic performance (Adelson & Niehaus, 2013). Other studies emphasized specific interventions schools need to put in place to enhance the self-concept of each child (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014). Most studies shared perspectives of immigrant students and recommended relating to immigrant students in ways that boost the self-esteem of each student (Clark et al., 2013; Cocking & Greenfield, 2014; Grothaus & Schellenberg, 2012).

The literature review also revealed immigrant parents have high expectations for their children to succeed in school (Ford, 2012). The motivation for this study is to add the voice of immigrant families by focusing on meanings immigrant parents attached to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. African immigrant parents were the subjects of this study because African immigrants are the least research immigrant group in U.S. public schools. The responses of African immigrant parents who participated in this study have provided a unique perspective to the literature on challenges faced by immigrant students in U.S. public schools. The unique perspectives provided are meanings African immigrant families attached to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. Based on the impact of sociocultural stressors, immigrant families have developed perceptions about U.S. schools. The results are connected in this section to the learning environments of immigrant students, and educators' response as agents of change.

### **Learning Environments of Immigrant Students**

The learning environment was crucial to the success of immigrant students in U.S. schools (Ford, 2012). A conducive learning environment was one in which every student was valued and respected. In such an environment, educators engaged and motivated each student

(Noguera, 2012). All the participants in this study shared how educators ensured their children had a conducive learning environment. Participant A gave examples of teachers engaging her children in ways that made the children to succeed academically. Participant B shared her daughter was motivated by teachers to stay focused when she was teased by peers. Participant C shared teachers wrote notes home when her children were in elementary schools as motivation. Participant D shared her son is an honor student in high school because his math teacher engaged and motivated him. Participant E gave examples of a science teacher who spent extra time before and after school tutoring her daughter. Participant H shared her younger daughter succeeded in school because teachers provided second chances. Participant G shared her shy, secluded, and quiet daughter was active in school because of the conducive learning environment created by educators.

The literature highlighted an unhealthy learning environment was one in which bias, stereotypes, and cultural differences influenced how educators related to some students (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014; Dixson & Donnor, 2013). Studies revealed a hostile learning environment was not conducive to academic productivity. Immigrant students were not productive academically when their non-immigrant peers call them names and made fun of their appearances (Noguera, 2012). The participants in this study revealed their children were distressed when teased and bullied by their non-immigrant peers. The students cried and pleaded with their parents to change their schools. Some participants shared their children were afraid to speak out in class because other students made fun of their heavy accent. Participant C shared her son withdrew and would not speak out in class and at home because he was teased by his non-immigrant peers. Participant H shared her son could focused in school because other



students teased him about her dressing style and heavy accent. She used to volunteer at the school, and she had to stop because it was negatively affecting her son's academic progress.

### **Educators' Response as Agents of Change**

Educators are agents of change, who work with people of different cultures and values. Studies found when educators understood sociocultural factors that negatively affected immigrant students, teachers were better prepared to properly engage and motivate students to succeed (Braganza & Lad, 2013; Goodwin, 2017; Norris, 2014). When the daughter of Participant A could not understand her teachers, due to the pace at which teachers spoke, the parents requested she be dropped a grade lower. The administrator of the school refused the request of the parents and worked with their daughter to adjust to how people speak in the U.S. Because the school was prepared to properly engage and motivate each student, Participant A daughter has no more problem understanding her teachers.

While some U.S. public schools labeled immigrant students struggling academically as having learning disabilities (Matthews & Mahoney, 2005), some implemented early school-based interventions to bridge the gap in academic achievement (Conger, 2007). In this study, educators as agents of change implemented school-based interventions instead of labeling students as having a learning disability. When Participant D's daughter was struggling with science, the science teacher spent extra time with her after school. Participant D shared her daughter completed her eighth grade class with a B+ in science because of the school-based intervention.

Studies revealed educators as agents of change served as advocates for immigrant students by relating in ways that boosted the self-esteem of each student (Schellenberg & Grothaus, 2009). In this study, the interactions of educators boosted the self-esteem of both

immigrant students and their parents. Participant B shared her daughter was motivated by her teachers to stay focused when she was teased by her peers. Participant E shared the high school her children attended engaged them in ways that make them feel safe. Participant G shared her shy, secluded, and quiet daughter became active and successful academically because teachers encouraged and spent time with her.

The findings of this study showed the value of uncovering meanings African immigrant parents attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. public schools. Scholars can build upon this study. This study has provided an understanding of the initial reactions and responses of African immigrant parents about their children's experiences in U.S. schools. This study explained how African immigrant parents provided emotional support when their children were encountering challenges in schools. Studies showed African immigrants valued education and have high expectations for the children to succeed in U.S. schools (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013; Ford, 2012). Therefore, uncovering meanings African immigrant families attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools was critical. This study has added to the literature by providing scholars with meanings African immigrant parents from Liberia, West Africa attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. public schools.

### **Limitations**

There are certain limitations as it relates to this qualitative ethnography case study. The study sample was limited to eight African immigrant families randomly selected from Liberia, West Africa. The study was narrowly focused on children of families that attended U.S. public schools in the Pacific Northwest. African immigrant families from Liberia whose children attended private and charter schools were not part of this study. African Americans and other minority groups were not the subject of this study. The researcher was an African immigrant

parent from Liberia, West Africa. This study focused solely on the perspectives of the participants. Steps were put in place to avoid the researcher from bringing unintentional bias into the data interpretations and analysis.

### **Implication of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory**

The findings of this study have implications for practice in U.S. public schools. Meanings the participants attached to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools have implications for future education policy. The findings of the study indicate the merit of social constructivism theory within the context of minimizing negative experiences for productivity.

#### **Implication for Practice**

Meanings African immigrant parents attached to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools have relevancy to practice. Studies showed when immigrant students enter U.S. schools, the environment in which they learned determined the degree of their success and/or failures (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). The findings of this study indicate the learning environment in U.S. public schools in the Pacific Northwest was healthy for immigrant students with one concern. African immigrant girls were treated better than boys. If African immigrant girls are treated better than African immigrant boys in U.S. public schools, the girls are likely to succeed academically than the boys. There must be a conducive learning environment for all immigrant students, not just the girls. A conducive learning environment is one in which every student is valued and respected. In such an environment, educators engaged and motivated each student (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Dixson & Donnor, 2013; Noguera, 2012).

An unhealthy learning environment is one in which bias, stereotypes, and cultural differences influenced how educators relate to some students (Dixson & Donnor, 2013; Noguera, 2012). While this study did not uncover specific reasons immigrant girls were treated better than

immigrant boys, the perception of participants is teachers have bias against immigrant boys. The bias educators have towards immigrant boys caused educators to have low expectations for immigrant boys to succeed academically (Ford, 2012; Noguera, 2012). When teachers had low expectations as it related to the academic ability of immigrant students, it was difficult for immigrant students to succeed academically (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Studies found there is a link between an unhealthy learning environment and academic achievements (Dixson & Donnor, 2013). Where there were hostile learning environments, immigrant students could not focus and were identified and labeled as having learning disabilities (Ford, 2012; Noguera, 2012).

Educators need to treat immigrant boys with the same respect, compassion, and dedication as immigrant girls are treated. The participants in this study shared teachers spent more time with their daughters before and after school to tutor them. When the girls had challenges, the teachers empathized with them and found ways to motivate them. However, the participants expressed frustration that teachers were not doing the same for their sons. Educators need to understand that boys had difficulties adjusting to a new culture while encountering racial biases and discriminations than girls (Adair, 2014; Dixson & Donnor, 2013). Studies have revealed Hispanic male immigrant students performed poorly in some U.S. schools because they experienced stereotypes and biases (Braganza & Lad, 2013). Other male immigrant students could not perform well in U.S. schools because of hostility from their White peers (Norris, 2014).

One way to give immigrant boys the same treatment as girls would be to pair them up with male teachers and staff. Another way would be to assign groups of struggling immigrant boys to female teachers for tutoring. Pairing boys with male staff or groups of boys with female teachers would lead to a conducive learning environment. Studies highlighted a conducive

learning environment was one in which every student was valued and respected. In such an environment, educators engaged and motivated each student (Noguera, 2012). Each student needs to be engaged and motivated by educators to succeed academically.

### **Implication for Policy**

The meanings participants attached to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools have implications for future education policy. The major policy issues participants complained about in this study were differences in cultural practices. Studies found immigrant families while adjusting to a new culture, must raise their kids based on values opposite to their culture of origin (Dixson & Donnor, 2013; Goodwin, 2017). In this study, participants shared their frustration with a particular policy issue. All eight participants asked multiple times why teachers had to call parents about their children's lateness to class? Culturally, in Liberia, if a student is late to school, the student bears the consequences of being late. The parents are not called. All eight participants reported discussing calling them with teachers but were told that was the policy.

Policymakers should consider calling parents only if a student is absent from school without notification from parents. Immigrant parents were frustrated because their children rode the bus to school. It did not make sense to them to be called for lateness to class when the school bus took the children to school. Policymakers should give immigrant students grace period to adjust to the new system before calling their parents about being late to class. It would be best to call the parents if a student completely did not attend an assigned class.

### **Implication for Theory**

The goal of this study was to uncover meanings African immigrant parents from Liberia attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. public schools. The study was shaped and framed through the lens of social constructivism (Creswell, 2014). When people from different

backgrounds interact, they can develop socially and construct their knowledge of each other's lived experiences (McKinley, 2015). When people of different cultures and backgrounds understand one another, bridges can be built (Lundgren & Poell, 2016; Morrice, 2013). The findings of this study support the theory that the cultural values and belief systems of people from different backgrounds and racial groups in isolation cannot adequately resolve the challenges they faced (Lundgren & Poell, 2016). Educators and immigrant families need to engage and connect to ensure the academic success of immigrant students.

The study found the initial challenge African immigrant students encountered in U.S. schools was understanding their teachers. The major problem was with the pace at which teachers spoke. When educators and African immigrant families connected and engaged each other, the root of the problem was identified. Interventions were put in place and the children succeeded academically.

Individuals can understand the lived experiences of others, not by observation, but by interactions (Morrice, 2013). In this study, the primary challenge reported by immigrant students from Liberia was peer-based. The challenges involving peers were teasing, bullying, and the trauma of gun threats in schools. The eight participating families shared stories of how their children were teased or bullied by peers in U.S. schools. Two participants shared how their children were traumatized because other students took guns to schools, although the guns were never used. Educators could not understand why the children were traumatized when they never saw the guns. The schools were locked down but there were no incidents. In one instance, the gun issue was a toy gun. Yet one of the immigrant students cried for a week each day and refused to go to school. To understand what was going on with the student, educators interacted with the family through meetings and home visits. By interacting with the family, educators

understood their lived experience. The family came to the U.S. after ten years of the 14 years civil war in Liberia. Because the trauma of the civil war was still fresh in the minds of the children, they relived the trauma when they heard gun was on their school campus.

Bridges can be built when people of different socioeconomical, racial, and ethnic backgrounds interact with one another (Lundgren & Poell, 2016). The results of the study showed participants in the study engage educators when their children shared their experiences. The parents did not accuse educators but went to understand what happened. Educators did not refuse to hear the parents. The participants shared educators were respectful and paid attention. Because both immigrant families and educators interacted, bridges were built. Teachers put in extra time and the immigrant students bridged the academic gap. Self-concept was one factor that contributed to the achievement gap among children of immigrants (Bryan & Morrison, 2014). The study conducted by Bryan and Morrison (2014) in New York highlighted the link between self-doubt or lack of self-concept and poor academic performance. The study attributes poor educational outcomes of immigrant students to racial discrimination, inappropriate assessment, misplacement in school programs, and lack of parental involvement. Other stressors reported in the study included family problems, identity confusion, difficulty making friends, anxiety, feelings of isolation, and depression. All the listed stressors led to self-doubt, which resulted in poor academic performance (Bryan & Morrison, 2014). In this study, the lack of self-concept was minimized because educators and immigrant families in the Pacific Northwest built bridges through interactions. The bridges built by educators and families led to school-based interventions.

People understand and attach meanings to their experiences as they interact with others (Creswell, 2014; McKinley, 2015; Morrice, 2013). This study uncovered meanings African

immigrant parents from Liberia attached to the experiences of their children in U.S. schools. Based upon interactions with educators, the participants perceived U.S. schools as a place where students had too much freedom and educators had no authority over the students. Although participants felt teachers were stripped of authority over the students, Participants perceived of educators as supportive. While all participant expressed educators are supportive, five of the participants thought educators were slow to act because of the inability of educators in U.S. schools to discipline students. The findings of the study revealed values immigrant parents held dear about accountability and academic achievements were in conflict with the values of their new culture (Ford, 2012).

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

During the data analysis, three themes became apparent for further study. By sorting identified patterns and developing themes, I identified situations or events I would recommend for further studies. One finding of this study was African immigrant girls were treated better than boys. Further study is needed to determine if the assertion African immigrant girls are treated better than boys is true and to provide crucial insights into why. There is also a need to explore the impacts of after school programs. I would also recommend for further study, calls to parents for lateness to class. I am curious to know if it is only African immigrant parents who think the calls are meaningless. Future research into those themes would provide critical insights and may enhance conduciveness of learning environments.

The first theme I would recommend for further study is the assertion that immigrant girls are treated by educators better than immigrant boys. Three of the study participants with both sons and daughters in U.S. public schools in the Pacific Northwest stated their girls were treated better than their boys. I would recommend a qualitative study that will explore how and why



African immigrant girls are treated better than boys. Studies showed the way immigrant students were treated in some U.S. schools did impede their academic performance (Clark et al., 2013). For example, Hispanic male immigrant students performed poorly in some U.S. schools because they experienced stereotypes and biases (Braganza & Lad, 2013). If African immigrant girls are treated better than African immigrant boys as perceived by participants in this study, we need research that will explore the why, how and what. I would recommend a longitudinal study to examine the achievement levels of students from all racial and ethnic groups for future research on the assertion that African immigrant girls are treated better than African immigrant boys.

The second recommendation for further study is to conduct a qualitative case study on the impacts of after school programs. All the participants shared after-school programs helped their children succeed academically. However, during a conversation with a community-based organization leader, I was told after school programs are sponsored by outside organizations in partnership with schools. I am not sure if she was referring to all after school programs. Further insight is needed on the impacts of after school programs and the groups that sponsored them. Every participant in this study credited the academic success and achievements of their children to after school programs. Participant F states,

The after-school program saved my son. He was struggling when we first came to the U.S. When he was placed in after-school program, he got more focused and did well in school. He is now in high school and still a part of the after-school program. The last semester, he got a 3.8 GPA. That would never have been possible without the after-school program.

After school programs helped immigrant students because they create a conducive environment for learning. A conducive learning environment is one in which every student is

valued and respected. In such an environment, educators engaged and motivated each student (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Dixon & Donnor, 2013; Noguera, 2012). A conducive learning environment positively influenced the success of immigrant students (Noguera, 2012). In a conducive learning environment, educators understood that immigrant students start at a disadvantage and had few options and financial resources (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). We might need a study like the one conducted by Hibel and Jasper (2012). Data included official student records, interviews with parents, direct child assessments, and questionnaires administered to children, parents, teachers and school principals. In this study, the questionnaires should be also administered to after-school programs sponsors and staff.

The third recommendation for further research would be a qualitative study that examines the effectiveness and impacts of calls to parents for lateness to class. I am curious to know if it is only African immigrant parents that think the calls are meaningless. All the participants in this study did not find purpose and meaning in the calls from schools about their children been late to class. Participant G comments highlight the frustration of the participants

The children ride on the school bus daily to school. How can the school called to say they are late to class? Did the driver of the school bus arrive late with the children? Or is it because our children are immigrants and still trying to get adjusted to finding their classes? It is a waste of our time and that of the schools if they are calling for lateness to class.

Besides immigrant families and school administrators, the participants in future research should include people who worked on multicultural issues, programs and interventions involving immigrants and minority students. Future research into this theme would provide critical insights.

## **Practical Suggestions**

I worked in healthcare as an administrator for 10 years. During my time as a leader in healthcare, I repeated three phrases daily to remind staff of the core values of the system. The phrases were, “know me, care for me, and ease my way.” The phrases were emphasized daily to staff to enhance the goal of providing individualized care to each patient. To provide individualized care, every discipline (not just doctors and nurses) needed to know, care for, and ease the way of each patient as an individual. This portion of the study I am classifying as the “ease my way” for African immigrant students in U.S. schools.

The first three chapters of this study reflect the “know me” to educators. Multiple studies revealed immigrant families have high expectations for their children to succeed in U.S. schools (Curry-Stevens et al., 2013; Ford, 2012; Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Immigrant students faced challenges in U.S. schools that led to low academic achievements (Goodwin, 2017; Norris, 2014). The learning environment was crucial to the success of immigrant students in U.S. schools (Clark et al., 2013; Ford, 2012).

The findings of this study (Chapters 4 and 5) provide educators tools to care for immigrant students, specially, African immigrant students. The study uncovered meanings African immigrant parents attached to their children’s experiences in U.S. schools. Challenges immigrant students faced in U.S. schools cannot be solved without inputs from their families or communities (Lowenhaupt, 2014). Below are practical suggestions that could help African immigrant students adapt with ease in U.S. schools. To ease the way for African immigrant students, educators need to put in place measures to ensure immigrant children adapt to succeed in U.S. schools. The goal of understanding the experiences of immigrant children is to put in

place measures that will ensure immigrant children adapt well to succeed in U.S. schools (Suarez-Orozco, 2012).

### **Measure 1: Placement in Early Intervention Programs**

The study highlighted three challenges faced by African immigrant students from Liberia involving teachers. The challenges involving teachers were classified as pace of speaking, process issues, and lack of interest. The most difficult challenge involving teachers was pace of speaking. The participants reported their children experienced difficulties initially understanding their teachers when they first entered U.S. public schools. The challenge was due to the pace at which teachers spoke and how words were pronounced.

Placement in early intervention programs to adapt to the pace of speaking and pronunciations in the U.S. would ease the way of African immigrant students. Language barrier negatively affected the academic performance of immigrant students (Adelson & Niehaus, 2013; Bryan & Morrison, 2014). The findings of this study revealed students were not placed in early intervention programs until parents engaged school administrators. When Participant A's daughter complained she could not understand her teachers, the parents engaged the school to seek help for their daughter. The school placed her in a special class that helped her adapt to pronunciations in the U.S.

It seems immigrant students from Liberia were not placed into English as a Second Language (ESL) class. One reason could be protecting the self-concept of the students. In the study conducted by Adelson and Niehaus (2013), the self-concept of English-speaking immigrant students was affected by placement in ESL. For most of these immigrant students, English was the only language they spoke. When placed in ESL, the placement affected their

self-concept, leading to self-doubt, lack of interest and low academic achievement (Adelson & Niehaus, 2013; Bryan & Morrison, 2014).

Not understanding teachers due to pace of speaking and different pronunciation of words can also affect the self-concept of English-speaking immigrant students. Lack of self-concept undermined the confidence of immigrant students (Adelson & Niehaus, 2013). One participant reported her daughter lost confidence in her ability because she could not understand her teachers when she first enrolled in U.S. schools. The participant stated,

My daughter was worried she would not make it in school. She wished she had a recorder to record her teachers and have someone explain to her the recordings. She could not understand her teachers because they spoke too fast and pronounced words differently.

The good news is U.S. schools already have an intervention program to help English speaking immigrant students. All the participants reported U.S. schools took appropriate actions to help their children adapt to English in the U.S. English speaking immigrant students should be timely placed in special intervention programs. At the time of enrollment, an assessment should be done to determine placement. The assessment should focus on pace of speaking and pronunciation of words in the U.S. To avoid negative self-concept, immigrant parents and other English-speaking immigrant students should be a part of the process. The goal is to boost the morale of newly enrolled English-speaking immigrant students. For immigrant students to succeed in U.S. schools, educators need to connect with immigrant families to meet the unique needs of immigrant students (Adair, 2014).

## **Measure 2: Use Parent Teacher Conferences to Engage and Connect with Families**

Parental involvement was key to a student's success across racial and ethnic backgrounds (Goodwin, 2017). Studies indicated when educators engaged parents, the academic success of

immigrant children was enhanced (Braganza & Lad, 2013). I am recommending teachers spend more time with parents during parent-teacher's conference. There are benefits for engaging and connecting with immigrant families. Trust can be built, leading to a comfort level that motivates and encourages knowledge sharing with each other for efficiency and proficiency (Friedman, 2014). Sociocultural stressors can be turned into positives, removing all fears, and enhancing the processes of knowledge sharing (Hislop, 2013).

As educators and immigrant parents share knowledge, a bond of connectiveness, trust and collaboration can be created (Friedman, 2014). As a result, misconceptions due to implied biases are minimized. Educators can have a better understanding of the cultural backgrounds of immigrant students to empower them to succeed (Chitiyo & Nyemba, 2018). When trust is created, fear of getting into trouble with U.S. schools' administrators and U.S. governments would be minimized. Immigrant parents will be empowered to hold their children accountable. Immigrant families fear exerting authority and influence over their children in the U.S. (Norris, 2014). Values immigrant parents held dearly about academic achievements were not emphasized (Cocking & Greenfield, 2014). When educators engage and connect with immigrant families, misconceptions can be minimized (Lowenhaupt, 2014).

### **Measure 3: Reevaluate Calling Parents for Lateness When Students Ride School bus to School**

The participants in this study complained about getting calls from U.S. schools about their children been late to class. They participants could not understand the rationale of such calls. One participant asked during the study,

Our children ride the bus to school every day. Why are we getting calls they are late to class. Were the drivers of the bus late? Did something happened on the way to school? I

don't understand. The schools should not call us about been late to school. The school bus took our children to school. Why are the children late?

Participant G also expressed frustration with the calls as followed:

The children ride on the school bus daily to school. How can the school called to say they are late to class? Did the driver of the school bus arrive late with the children? Or is it because our children are immigrant and still trying to get adjusted to finding their classes? It is a waste of our time and that of the schools if they are calling for lateness to class.

I am recommending the policy to call parents when students are late to class be reevaluated. Immigrant students should be given grace period to adjust to finding their classes. Parents should be notified when a student missed a class completely. U.S. schools should seek to make all calls to parents purposeful. If parents do not see purpose in a call, appropriate actions will not be taken to correct behaviors.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined perceptions of African immigrant families from Liberia, West Africa as it related to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. The primary research question that guided this study was, "What are African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. public schools?" This phenomenon was explored to uncover meanings African immigrant parents from Liberia attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools. The focus was on hearing stories the children told their parents about their experiences in U.S. public schools. This study captured the parents' responses and reactions. Steps the parents took to intervene when their children complained, and the outcomes were also captured

during the study. The study also captured meanings African immigrant parents attached to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools.

The perspectives and voices of participants in this qualitative ethnographic case study guided the discussion in this chapter. The voices of participants guided the connections between what this research might mean to educators. The perspectives of participants helped fill the gaps in the literature, and the confirmation or addition of new knowledge to the scholarly community.



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## **Appendix A:**

### **Interview Protocol**

**Time of interview:**

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Brief description of study: This research study examines the perceptions of African immigrant families from Liberia, West Africa as it relates to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. The primary research question is, "What are African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. public schools?" The focus is on hearing the stories the children tell their parents about their experiences in U.S. public schools. There are three goals for conducting this study. The first goal is to uncover the parents' response and reactions to the reported experiences of their children. The second goal is to uncover steps the parents took to intervene and the outcomes. The third goal is to uncover meanings the parents attached to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools.

**Questions:**

1. What was your initial reaction and response to the stories your children told you about their experiences in U.S. public schools?
2. What steps did you as a parent take to support your child in U.S. schools and what were the outcomes?

3. What are the meanings you as an African immigrant parent attached to your children's interaction in U.S. public schools?
4. How can you use the stories your children shared about their experiences to motivate and empower your children to succeed in U.S. schools?

Notes will be taken during the interviews. The notes will be coded to guide the data analysis process. Permission will be requested from the participants to allow this researcher records the interviews. The recording will ensure the perspectives of participants are fully captured. The transcripts of the recordings will be reviewed with each participant for clarity and accuracy before such transcript can be used for analysis.

**Appendix B:**  
**Focus Group Protocol and Questions**

**Time of focus group session:**

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Participants:

Background: This study is intended to examine the perceptions of African immigrant families from Liberia, West Africa as it relates to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. Each family has already shared the experiences of their children as told them by their children. This focus group session is intended to expand upon our discussion and help me gain a greater insight into the larger perceptions of African immigrant families.

**Questions**

These questions will guide our conversation.

1. Based upon the stories you children told you, how did you feel about your children's potential to succeed in U.S. school? Why did you feel that way?
2. Did you ask your children how the experiences made them feel? If you did, what did your children say? How did you react?
3. Do you think the experiences of your children in U.S schools have anything to do with their academic performance? Why do you think so?

The primary research question that drives this study is, "What are African immigrant families' perceptions of their children's experiences in U.S. public schools?" This phenomenon is being

explored to uncover meanings African immigrant parents from Liberia attached to their children's experiences in U.S. schools.

**Confidentiality:**

Your privacy/confidentiality as outlined in the consent form is guarantee. However, due to the nature of this focus group sharing, privacy cannot be guaranteed. Therefore, if any participant wants to share a personal experience that you do not want to link yourself or others to, please speak about such experience in general or non-specific terms.

**Appendix C:**  
**Journal Protocol**

This study focuses solely on the perceptions of African immigrant families from Liberia, West Africa as it relates to their children's experiences in U.S. public schools. The focus is on hearing the stories the children tell their parents about their experiences in U.S. public schools. For accuracy, a collaborative journal entry will be made each time contact is made with participants. A story-telling narrative will be used in the journal entry to avoid ambiguity. The journal entry will include the following:

Date: Day of the week, month, and year

Place: A description of the scene of the interaction.

Description: Story-telling narrative will be used to describe all interactions.

## **Appendix D: Statement of Original Work**

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously- researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

### **Statement of academic integrity**

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

### **Explanations**

#### ***What does “fraudulent” mean?***

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

#### ***What is “unauthorized” assistance?***

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

### Statement of Original Work (continued)

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University–Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*.

J Hilary Gbotoe, Jr

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Digital Signature

J Hilary Gbotoe, Jr

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Name (Typed)

November 15, 2019

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Date