

African Immigrant Students' Experiences in American Physical Education Classes

Seidu SOFO¹, John NANDZO², Eugene F. ASOLA³, and Kaduabu S. AJONGBAH⁴

¹Department of HHPR, Southeast Missouri State University,
One University Plaza, Cape Girardeau, MO 63701, USA
Phone: 573-651-2843

²Department of Academic Enrichment, Tennessee State University,
Nashville, TN 37209, USA

³Department of Kinesiology & Physical Education, Valdosta State University,
Valdosta, GA 31698, USA

⁴Department of Physical Education & Recreation, Bethune-Cookman University,
Daytona Beach, FL 32114, USA

Corresponding Author:

Prof. Seidu Sofo

Department of HHPR, Southeast Missouri State University,
One University Plaza, Cape Girardeau, MO 63701, USA
Phone: 573-651-2843

E-Mail: ssofo@semo.edu

Abstract

Drawing on a neo-racism theoretical framework, the study examined 17 African immigrant students' experiences in physical education classes in the United State (U.S.). The formal interview technique served as the primary data source. Data were analyzed using constant comparative analysis and analytic induction. Findings were grouped into four major themes: (a) stereotypes and isolation (b) teachers' lack of culturally responsive pedagogical skills, (c) U.S. students' disrespect for teachers, and (d) coping strategies. The immigrant students' viewed their physical education classes as profoundly negative, due, in part, to their perception of negative stereotyping by their peers, and a lack of culturally responsive pedagogical skills exhibited by their teachers. Teachers need to employ culturally relevant pedagogy in their classes to promote positive interactions and ensure instructional success for immigrant students.

KEY WORDS: African immigrant students, neo-racism, physical education, United States.

1.0 Introduction

Classrooms are increasingly diverse in the United States (U.S.); however, the teaching workforce remains predominantly White (Cruz-Janzen, 2000). In addition, teachers and students live in cultural isolation due to high rates of segregation along racial, ethnic, and cultural lines (Gay, 1997). Furthermore, the school—a non-neutral site (McLaren, 1998)—serves as a context of cultural transmission for minority students and new immigrants and their children. Consequently, ethnic minority students often encounter classroom and school practices and norms that reflect mainstream or Eurocentric cultural values (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). To exacerbate the situation, many teachers often have limited personal experience with people of diverse cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Many teachers possess limited knowledge of people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Chepyator-Thomson, You & Russell, 2000; Napper-Owen, Kovar, Ermler & Mehrof, 1999), and have seldom or never been exposed to culturally diverse experiences (Spark, Butt, & Pahnos, 1996). To bridge the cultural gap between teachers and their students, many scholars have urged schools to strive to infuse multicultural education in schools and classrooms (Gay 2000; Gay, 2003/2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995). According to Banks (2004), the major goal of multicultural education is to “reform the schools and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality” (p. 3). Despite Banks et al.’s (2001) assertion that multicultural education is a critical component of quality education, Chepyator-Thomson et al. (2000), presents the contrary: effective multicultural education practices are missing in many K-12 physical education classrooms.

To promote positive interactions and ensure instructional success, teachers need to respect students’ culture, listen to students—their perceptions of life, and school (Hellison, 2003).

1.1 Stereotypes

The negative stereotyping that sub-Saharan Africans are ‘savages’ (Traoré, 2004) still thrives in many American homes, schools, and in the media, resulting in the assumption that Africans are uncivilized and their culture incompatible with formal education (Lee & Opio, 2011). Lee and Opio (2011) reported that African college athletes in the U.S. experienced varying forms of stereotypes and discrimination due to negative views about their African heritage. The authors added that the African student-athletes in their study expressed indifference from Americans in learning about African culture. Lee and Rice (2007) also reported negative experiences of international students at a U.S. university. The authors recounted negative comments about the international students’ home country and culture, feelings of inferiority based on media portrayals and direct insults.

Immigrant students often are not accepted by their American peers because of their accents and obvious differences (Traoré, 2004; 2006). African immigrant students, unlike everyone else, encounter degrading stereotypes because of racism in America ((Traoré & Lukens, 2006; Waters, 1999). In addition, they are judged by the same stereotypes that have oppressed their African American peers for many years (Traoré, 2004).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been used to explain racial discrimination in the U.S. Drawing from previous works in critical legal studies, CRT has been applied to education to explain inequalities experienced by students of color in the U.S. (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). However, the CRT has limitations in accounting for immigrant students’ temporary stay in the U.S. Thus, neo-racism was deemed more appropriate for this study.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Neo-racism served as the theoretical framework (Balibar, 1992; Hervik, 2004) for the current study. Neo-racism does not only discriminate on the basis of biology, but also culture, national origin and relationships between countries (Beoku-Betts, 2004). This ‘new racism’ as it is called, refocuses on national superiority by marginalizing other groups whose cultures are not in resonance with the dominant group (Barker, 1981). For example, Beoku-Betts (2004) noted that African women graduate students in science reported they were marginalized by their professors and peers and viewed as ‘Third World’ persons, due to their countries of origin. The women were “. . . aware of the negative stereotyping and low expectations that were embedded in the comments made to them.” (Beoku-Betts, 2004, p. 124).

1.3 Purpose of the Study

There has been an increase in the number of studies that have examined students’ perspectives in physical education since the 1980s (Graham, 1995; Pope, 2006). Unfortunately, little is known about immigrant students’ experiences in U.S. physical education classes. To date, no studies have been conducted on the physical education experiences of immigrant students, especially those from Africa.

Immigrant students from Africa have received little attention from educational researchers. African immigrants may encounter more disadvantages than other immigrants due to the racial hierarchy in the U.S. (Rong & Brown, 2001). This group of immigrants has been shown to experience negative stereotypes in U.S. schools (Traoré, 2006; Traoré & Lukens, 2006), due in part to misconceptions about Africa. As Traoré and Lukens put it, “The darkest thing about Africa is America’s ignorance of it” (p.1).

The purpose of the study, therefore, was to examine 17 African immigrant students’ experiences in U.S. physical education classes and how those experiences affected their engagement and views about the subject. Two research questions guided the study: 1. What is the nature of the experiences of a group of African immigrant students in physical education classes in the United States? 2. What meanings do African immigrant students make of their experiences in physical education classes in the United States? An understanding of the nature of the immigrant students’ experiences and the meanings they make of those experiences would help physical educators to create culturally meaningful environments for this group of students. Furthermore, such understanding would be valuable to other stakeholders such as parents of immigrant students, school counselors, and administrators.

2.0 Method

2.1 Participants and Context

The study employed the purposive sampling technique (Patton, 2002) to select participants for the study. This technique allowed the authors to identify and select information-rich participants for the study. Participants included 17 students (12 boys and 5 girls) from 10 immigrant families from four Sub-Saharan African countries— Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and Uganda—in West and East Africa. The immigrant students aged 8-20 years.

At the time of the study, three of the student participants had been in the United States. for only three months, two for three and half years, five for four years, four for six years, one for 11 years, and two for 15 years. Most of the participants were placed in U.S. classes that were one to three grade levels lower than the grades they would have been in their home countries. On average, the immigrant students were older than their U.S. classmates. Only six of the immigrant students were placed in grades that were equivalent to the grades they would have been back in their home countries. Despite the fact that their previous education was predominantly in English, nine of them were placed in English as a Second Language programs in their respective schools for a period that ranged from two to four semesters.

All 17 students were living with both of their parents at the time of the study. The highest level of education attained by the immigrant parents ranged from some high school to doctorate degree. All participants were resident in the United States: eight in the Northeast, five in the Midwest, and four in the Southeast. Six of the students attended schools that were predominantly White. The White student population in those schools ranged from 87-98% and the African American population from 2-5%. Ten attended schools that were predominantly African American. The African American population in those schools ranged from 76-97%, with the White student population ranging from 2-12%. Only one immigrant student attended a school that had an approximately even distribution of Whites, African Americans and students of other races. Forty-two percent of the students in that school were African American, 38% White, and 20% comprised of other races.

2.2 Data Collection

Formal interviews served as the primary data collection technique. The study utilized the interview guide approach (Patton, 2002). The interview guide contained a list of topics that the authors wanted to examine during the interviews. This approach allowed the authors to probe and follow a line of inquiry that shed light on participants' experiences in U.S. schools and classrooms. Formal approval for the study was obtained from the Human Subject Committee at the first author's University. In addition, informed consent was obtained from the students' parents prior to data collection.

2.2.1 The Interview Guide

The interview guide consisted of demographic information and four topics. The first part of the guide elicited demographic information on the child's age, gender, grade level, country of origin, and parents' level of education. The first topic on the interview guide examined the immigrant students' initial school experiences in the U.S. with emphasis on what were memorable about their early days in U.S. schools and/or classrooms. The second topic asked for information on participants' early experiences in physical education classes in the U.S. Again, the authors wanted to know what were memorable about their early days in U.S. physical education classes, and how they felt about those experiences. The third topic attempted to elicit information on immigrant students' previous schooling history (where applicable) prior to emigrating to the U.S. The last topic related to comparisons of the African immigrant students' school and physical education experiences in the U.S. and their home countries (where applicable).

All participants were interviewed three times. All interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed. The interviews lasted from 30-55 minutes. The authors reminded the participants during each interview session that they were interested in their (students) experiences and perspectives rather than that of their parents.

2.2.2 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using constant comparative analysis (Patton, 2002). Each author read and re-read the interview transcripts to identify patterns and themes. Trustworthiness was established by researcher triangulation, peer debriefing and member checks (Creswell, 2003). Researcher triangulation involved each author independently reading and re-reading the transcripts for the first set of interviews they conducted for tentative themes. Each author then sent the transcripts, their tentative interpretations, and follow-up questions for subsequent interviews to one other member of the research team. This was intended to serve as a check and balance on each member of the research team. Thus, the interview guide for the second set of interviews incorporated tentative themes and follow-up questions from the first interview guide. Similarly,

the interview guide for the third set of interviews incorporated tentative themes and follow-up questions from the second set of interviews.

Two colleagues assisted with peer debriefing, one in the area of physical education teacher education and the other in elementary education. For example, the lead author sent the tentative themes with corresponding excerpts to the colleagues for comments. Finally, the authors did member checks during the second and third interviews. Each author read the tentative interpretations of the interviews to the participants for confirmation and/or clarifications regarding their responses from previous interviews where necessary. Participants indicated that the tentative themes were accurate interpretations of the interviews.

3.0 Results

The findings of this study are grouped into four themes and pseudonyms are used in place of actual names. The major themes of this study included: (a) stereotypes and isolation (b) teachers' lack of culturally responsive pedagogical skills, (c) U.S. students' disrespect for teachers, and (d) coping strategies.

3.1 Stereotypes and Isolation

The first theme focused on ways students dealt with stereotypes and isolation. The immigrant students experienced negative stereotypes at school due to misconceptions about Africa and Africans. The negative stereotypes in many cases resulted in the immigrants feeling isolated. A 20-year old 12th grade girl remembered one of such experiences:

On my first day in school here in the United States, I felt isolated by the American kids. In the classroom, none of the children wanted to sit by me or even near me. Some of them made comments like "it stinks over here" in reference to my direction. Some asked me if I went to school in Africa. Others asked if in Africa we slept [lived] with wild animals like the tiger. I told them the first time I ever saw a wild animal like the tiger was here in the U.S. at the zoo. They looked at me as if I was telling a lie. (Halu)

Halu's unsuccessful attempt to educate the native-born students about the negative stereotypes about Africa made her, just as other immigrant students, even more frustrated. Luke, also stated that, "A lot made fun of me, but few accepted the way I was in school. Some students thought I was funny because of the way I talked."

As a result of their negative perceptions of Africans, some U.S. students made stereotypical statements relating to perceived racial preferences for physical activities and sports. They directed the stereotypes to their African immigrant colleagues depending upon the ability or inability of the immigrant students to perform physical activities and sport. The U.S. students referred to their African classmates as "Blacks" when the latter did not perform physical activities or sports well. A seventh grade boy recounted how some of his classmates were "surprised" that he (a Black student) was not good at basketball. "Two boys [Americans] in my P.E. class said to me that they had not seen a Black [student] in seventh grade play basketball so poorly" (James). Because African Americans (Blacks) are over-represented in basketball in the U.S., some U.S. students expected the Africans (Blacks) to be able to play the game to a level they deemed appropriate for their age or grade level.

In contrast, some U.S. students tended to refer to the immigrant students as "Africans" when the latter performed physical activities or sports beyond the expectations of the former. As Gbara, a 15-year old ninth grade boy noted, "One of the students [American] asked me how an African like me is able to play basketball so well." As the comment showed, the U.S. student did not expect a child from Africa to be good at basketball, a predominantly American sport. Another immigrant student was upset that a native-born

student in her class commented, “That African girl can also jump rope” (Abena). Abena’s account exemplified the way the African immigrant students came to attach meaning to comments about them.

The results showed that eight (approximately 47%) of the African immigrants had limited interactions with their U.S. peers, in part, due to the negative comments about them. They appeared to be focused on getting the best of American education with little involvement with the American youth culture. Ajua, an 18-year old eleventh grade girl, remembered her parents telling her on arrival in the U.S., “This is your chance. Work hard and take advantage of the opportunity [good education].” She narrated a story that her parents might have told her on numerous occasions:

My parents always reminded me not to copy [imitate] the American students. They explained that the children here think it is alright to challenge their parents. They [parents] would show me boys and girls in our neighborhood who had dropped out of school because they didn’t listen to their parents.

Ajua’s comments show how her parents valued education, and that they tried to pass on the optimism about a better life to her. To her parents, one way of utilizing that advantage was for her to limit her involvement with U.S. youth culture. In response to a question as to whether her parents had a particular group of U.S. youth in mind she said, “No . . . they [parents] meant all those whose parents are American. I’m doing well at school, so my parents’ advice has helped me I guess.” Ajua, like the other immigrant students with limited interactions with their U.S. peers agreed with their parents that one way of achieving their dreams of a better life was to not get involved in U.S. youth culture.

3.2 Teachers’ Lack of Culturally Responsive Skills of Pedagogy

The second theme concerned teachers’ lack of pedagogical skills responsive to diversity in physical education. The missing skills, according to the immigrant students’ perception, were in the areas of physical education teachers’ instructional skills, and ways of caring. The immigrant students felt that some of their physical education teachers did not make the effort to teach them. For the immigrant students, the physical education teachers involved in this practice did not care about student learning. Jerome, a 17-year old ninth grader, lamented, “For example, they come to the gym and all they do is take the roll and sit. I thought they [teachers] are there to teach us.”

Other immigrant students thought their physical education teachers did not take the time to explain some of the unfamiliar terms to them. As an eight-year old second grade boy pointed out:

I sometimes do not understand the big words teachers use I wanted to know what that word meant and she [P.E. teacher] asked me to go look it up in a dictionary. I did not know what to do in the game. The other kids laughed at me. (Ebu).

Joanna, a nine-year old third grade girl, also expressed her frustration regarding the inability of her physical education teacher to explain the dribble in basketball. It must have been an overwhelming experience for a first grader in her first physical education lesson in a foreign land. She recalled the confusion in the following words:

It was confusing . . . my first basketball class in first grade. The P.E. teacher asked us to dribble. Everybody was bouncing [the ball] with the hand. Only me [sic] was kicking [the ball] with the feet. The teacher said “here [United States], we dribble with the hands.” So the following week at soccer clinic, I dribbled with my hands and people said I was wrong.

By Joanna’s account, her teacher did not take the time to explain to her the difference between dribbling in basketball and dribbling as in soccer. Teachers need to provide clear and explicit instructions to ensure optimal student engagement, especially for newly arrived immigrants.

The concept of caring or lack of it was very important to this group of African immigrant students. It was difficult for them to believe that teachers would not be interested in knowing how their students were feeling or doing in class. Gifty felt abandoned by both her physical education teacher and classmates. She remarked as follows:

No one wanted to play with me because I am African. So I just sat and watched until the P.E. teacher asked the class to get into two groups to play kickball. No one wanted me on their team. Each student upon realizing that I was on their team would just move slowly to the other team. Eventually, I had to sit out because I could not take the isolation anymore. (Gifty)

The most hurtful aspect of isolation, for the African immigrant students, was that in some cases, teachers did little to help them fully participate in class activities. As Gifty noted, "I sat out the entire class period and the P.E. teacher did not even ask me why I sat out." This feeling of neglect made them think as though they were not wanted in the class.

3.3 U.S. Students' Disrespect for Teachers

U.S. students' disrespect for their teachers was the third theme that emerged from the data. The African immigrant students viewed their U.S. colleagues as being disrespectful to their teachers. The immigrant students felt disrespectful behaviors in class were disruptive. The excerpt below typifies how participants felt about their American colleagues' disrespectful behavior. Ben, an 18-year old twelfth grader had this to say:

Majority of the students [American] disrespect the P.E. teachers because they feel that they are grown and nobody should tell them what to do and not do. They [American students] show disrespect toward the teachers by challenging their authority or cursing at the teachers.

The immigrant students were surprised that students could be so disrespectful to their teachers in class, using teacher-student interactions in their home countries as the frame of reference.

Some of the African students' perceptions of U.S. students' disrespect for teachers affected their engagement in physical education classes. They explained that volunteering to "help out" in class was viewed by some of their U.S. colleagues as a way of soliciting favors from the teacher. Mba, a 13-year old seventh grader stated, "when you help out with equipment or volunteer to show [demonstrate] how a skill is performed in class, they [native-born students] think you want to be the teacher's favorite student." Mba claimed that this attitude by the native-born students caused him to not "willingly answer questions or perform skills in class."

3.4 Coping Strategies

The African immigrant students in this study employed two strategies to deal with the negative stereotypes and isolation they faced on daily basis. First, most of them ignored the American students who made fun of them. Rather, they focused on their main objective for being in school—to get a good education. Drawing support from some of their teachers and/or parents, they remained steadfast, regardless of the negative stereotypes they faced on a daily basis. Halu, a 20-year old twelfth grade immigrant girl, said, "He [PE teacher] told me to be strong and that once they get to know me, they will always come around." Chukwu indicated that "My parents always reminded me that we [Africans] work hard despite the hardships confronting us." Halu had this to say about her parents' advice:

They [parents] would not accept any excuses for poor school work. They would constantly remind me to take full advantage of the opportunities available in America. They tell me not to listen to anyone who would want to make my life miserable in school.

As these remarks suggest, parental support played an important role in getting the immigrant students overcome the negative stereotypes and isolation.

The second strategy that the African immigrant students utilized to survive in the schools was success in academics and sports. They believed that by exhibiting high academic standards, the U.S. students would have no cause to make fun of them. Badu, a 19-year old twelfth grade immigrant student expressed his elation this way:

The most memorable thing about my first day of school was that, I made a lot of friends after solving a math problem nobody could solve. The other students were very surprised that I solved the math problem because of the negative mentality they had about Africans. I surely did proof [sic] them wrong.

Chukwu was one immigrant student that excelled both in academics and sports. He remembered his athletic achievement in the following remarks:

I made a lot of friends after I led my junior high school basketball team to win a championship. I realized many of the students' attitudes toward me had changed for the better. It also made me feel good about myself.

Regardless of the negative stereotypical experiences of the immigrant students in the early days of their arrival, none of them gave up.

In summary, examination of the immigrant students' perceptions indicated stereotypes and isolation and teachers' lack of culturally responsive pedagogical skills. Another finding of this study showed U.S. students' disrespect for their teachers. Finally, the immigrant students utilized two main strategies to cope with the negative experiences they faced in their physical education classes.

4. 0 Discussion and Conclusions

This study utilized a neo-racism perspective to examine a group of African immigrant students' experiences in U.S. physical education classes. The immigrant students perceived their physical education classes to be profoundly negative, due, in part, to their perception of negative stereotyping by their peers, and their teachers' lack of culturally responsive pedagogical skills. In their view, the teachers did very little to stop their U.S. peers from saying things that might hurt them because of their ethnicity and immigrant status. As Brock et al. (2009) observed, low status students would be silenced if teachers do not utilize strategies that would recognize and/or prevent the negative impact of status. For, as Rong and Brown (2001) noted, immigrant students are more likely to be silenced in class due to the racial and ethnic hierarchy in the U.S. In previous studies (for example, Ennis et al., 1999), students stressed the importance of a supportive environment in helping them to develop respect for self and others. The importance of teachers utilizing their students' cultural backgrounds and perceptions to improve instruction has been well documented (Culp, Chepyator-Thomson, & Hsu, 2009; Hellison, 2003). As Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (1995) noted, culturally competent teachers take the time to learn about the culture of their students. Students, therefore, need to learn about stereotyping and other biases that have negative effects on racial and ethnic relations (Banks et al., 2001). As Lee and Opio (2011) put it, it is not the sole responsibility of immigrant students to bare the "burden of ignorance." Rather, it is the responsibility of host institutions to create welcoming environments for the African immigrant students.

Consistent with the findings of Daoud and Quiocho (2005) and Olsen (1997), approximately 47% of the immigrant students in the current study had limited interaction with their American peers, what Portes and Zhou (1993) referred to as limited assimilation. However, other studies (for example, Waters, 1994), reported some degree of interaction between immigrant students and their American colleagues. In physical education, Culp et al. (2009) also reported that students from different cultural backgrounds interacted with

one another in class; even though they tended to socialize with students from their own cultural background outside class. Regarding the immigrant students with limited interaction, Kao and Tienda (1995) explained that some immigrant parents encourage and work toward their children's educational success while maintaining ethnic cultural values, and limiting their children's integration into U.S. youth culture. Banks et al. (2001), however, argued for intergroup contact, because it has the potential to minimize stereotypes.

The results of this study further indicated that the immigrant students perceived their teachers to lack skills of pedagogy related to caring. This finding pertained to physical education teachers' attitudes toward teaching, instructional skills, and the concept of caring. This group of immigrant students perceived caring to mean physical education teachers making the effort to teach them, explain skills and terminologies, and knowing how their students were feeling or doing in class. Further, the finding is consistent with the views of students in Smith and Pierre's (2009) study that teacher enthusiasm and caring are determinants of enjoyment in physical education. It also supports the assertion that caring is one of the requirements for positive teacher-student relationships (Noddings, 1992).

The findings in this study further showed that the African students used two coping strategies to overcome the negative experiences in their classrooms and schools. First, they ignored the U.S. students who made fun of them. Immigrant students in two other studies— Traoré (2006) and Yeh and Inose (2002) — were reported using a similar coping strategy. Second, they used success in academics and sports to survive in their schools. This study supports Brock et al.'s (2009) finding that students perceived to be athletic had high status in a sport education unit. Like the Black immigrant students in South African schools, those in the present study exhibited a strong sense of self-empowerment and self-agency (Vandeyar, 2010). They were determined to get the best of American education. Thus, rather than being passive participants, they played an active role in their own adaptation to American society (Fernandez-Kelly & Schaffer, 1994).

Both groups of students— the immigrant students and their U.S. peers— relied on their prior experiences as frames of reference in their perceptions of each other. The immigrant students used the adult-child relationship in their home countries to perceive their U.S. peers as disrespectful to their teachers. Similarly, their U.S. peers relied on the perceived racial preferences for sports and physical activities in the U.S. to refer to the former as "Blacks" or "Africans" based on their performance in physical activities or sport. However, as Harrison and Belcher (2006) noted, a sport such as basketball, for example, is regarded more appropriate for African Americans due to societal stereotypes. Other stereotypical statements about the immigrant students were a result of the U.S. students' misconceptions about Africa and Africans (Traoré & Lukens, 2006).

The African immigrant students in this study identified parental support as a source of their strength in withstanding the negative stereotypes and isolation in school. They also indicated that their parents had high expectations for them, and would not accept any excuses for poor school work. This is consistent with the finding that parental support and expectations affect immigrants' education (Glick & White, 2003).

The findings of this study support the call for teachers to employ culturally relevant pedagogy in their classes (Gay 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This would help them create positive learning environments for diverse groups of students. However, more studies are needed in order to further explore the nature of African immigrant students' experiences in U.S. physical education classes and what meanings they make of those experiences. Studies that include immigrant students' socio-economic backgrounds are needed. In addition, studies that would use participants from other geographic regions—North, Central, and Southern regions of Africa—would provide more insight. Perhaps, their experiences in U.S. classrooms would differ from those in the present study. Finally, a longitudinal study examining the intergenerational effect on the experiences of African

immigrant students in U.S. physical education classes would be useful. For example, future research could compare the experiences of first and second generation African immigrant students.

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