Chapter 10
Transnational Immigration and Family Context:
What Teachers Should Know

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the transnational nature of African immigrant students' experiences in the United States. In two case studies of students from Ethiopia and Somalia, the authors explore the students' pre- and post-immigration experiences, with a particular focus on their family and school contexts. The students' resiliency in the U.S. education system can be attributed to several factors in their migration histories, including their migration to join family members who were already part of established co-ethnic communities, thus linking them to social support networks, living in transnational family contexts that are characterized by the separation and subsequent reunification of family members, and viewing education as the key to unlocking new opportunities. The authors identify practical strategies for supporting the academic and social success of immigrant students by recognizing and capitalizing on the social capital they possess.

INTRODUCTION

According to data from the most recent census, 13% of the U.S. population is foreign-born, representing a 20% increase since 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, 2010). Increasing numbers of Af-

rican immigrants are contributing to this growing diversity, with close to two million immigrants settling in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The overall African immigrant population in the United States more than doubled between 1990 and 2000, and by 2005, approximately 2.5 million U.S. immigrants were from sub-Saharan Africa, including countries like Somalia and

Ethiopia (Schmidley, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, 2006).

This unprecedented number of recent immigrants is reflected in the changing demographics of many schools across the country. Today, one out of five children in the United States is a child of immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), and it is expected that by 2040, more than one out of three children will be children of immigrants (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2007; Suerez-Orozco, Onaga, & Lardemelle, 2010). Children of immigrants are often included in the numbers of English language learners (ELLs) reported in American schools. The ELL population constitutes the fastest growing segment of the school-age population in the United States (Fránquiz & Salinas, 2011; Kindler, 2002). In 2009, 21% of children ages 5–17 (11.2 million) spoke a language other than English at home, and 5% (2.7 million) spoke English with difficulty (NCES, 2011). Most schools refer to these students as ELL, the term used in this chapter, while federal laws (e.g., No Child Left Behind use the term *limited English proficient* (LEP). Both terms have been criticized in the research literature for overemphasizing English language acquisition to the exclusion of students' heritage language (Beykont, 2002; Bigalow, 2010; Brisk, 2008; Nieto, 2000). Indeed, I agree with the assertion that ELLs are *emergent bilinguals* who acquire English in school and continue to maintain and use their home languages. This is critically important when working with children of African immigrants and their families (Hersi & Watkinson, 2012).

It is only recently that researchers have begun exploring the experiences of African immigrant students in the United States (Ajrouch & Kusow, 2007; Bigelow, 2008, 2010; Hersi, 2011; Hersi & Watkinson, 2012; Kamaya, 1996; Kibour, 2001; Lee & Bean 2004; Lucas, 1997; Rong & Brown, 2002; Traore & Lukens, 2006). Called "invisible sojourners" by some and "model minorities" by others, the African immigrant population constitutes a fairly heterogeneous group (Arthur, 2000;

Lee & Bean, 2004; Reimers 2005; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). This heterogeneity can be seen in classrooms across the country. African immigrant students arrive at U.S. schools with vastly different immigration experiences, family situations, personal histories, and educational backgrounds. Some arrive in the United States with no formal education or having missed years of schooling, while others arrive with a rigorous academic education and often excel beyond most native-born students.

In the globally connected twenty-first century, technological innovations, globalization, and ease of transportation have altered our understanding of migration. Today's immigrants maintain transnational ties, building social networks that "link together their country of origin and their country of settlement" (Kivisto, 2001, p. 552). Given this context of globalization and the continued increase in African migration, it is important to examine the transnational nature of African immigrant students' experiences in the United States. To that end, in this chapter I examine the immigration and educational experiences of two immigrant students from Ethiopia and Somalia. My purpose is to uncover the complex factors that have contributed to their educational experiences. I explore both students' pre- and post-immigration experiences, with a particular focus on their family and school contexts. My goal is to identify practical strategies for supporting the academic and social success of immigrant students by recognizing and capitalizing on the social capital they possess.

RESEARCH ON IMMIGRATION, EDUCATION, AND FAMILY CONTEXT

African immigrants, indeed most immigrants, do not start with an even playing field—government policies, media portrayals, the societal reception of immigrants, and the presence and size of their ethnic communities have a significant impact on their success in adapting to life in the United

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