Title: 'You have to stand up for yourself': African Immigrant and Refugee Teens Negotiate Settlement in Vancouver

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Research Question:

This research examines how adolescent immigrants and refugees from countries in sub-Saharan Africa negotiate settlement in Metro Vancouver. The key questions addressed are: 1) What are the main challenges facing African youth who arrive in Canada during their teen years? 2) What strategies do they develop to navigate new social relationships, cultural expectations, and institutional structures in high school? 3) What policy recommendations will support and strengthen African youth's own strategies for successful integration?

Importance:

Adolescence is a particularly difficult time to migrate to another country. Youth must acquire new social and cultural capital to successfully navigate adult roles in the context of a significant 'clash' between expectations in African cultures and in Canada. Generational tensions between parents and teens, discouragement in school, low academic achievement and high drop-out rates, can lead to limited career prospects and impaired social cohesion in the long term.

Research Findings:

Adolescent immigrants and refugees from sub-Saharan Africa face significant challenges that can be clustered into two main categories: challenges related to a 'culture clash' between African and Canadian norms and values, and structural conditions affecting integration, including the organization of the school system. To navigate these challenges, African teens in this research learned to 'fit in' with their peers while 'standing up' for themselves in relation to peers and teachers and drawing on parental supports and African cultural values to develop gendered strategies to overcome difficulties. The experiences of these teens provides a vantage point from which to recommend programs that could help to shore up rather than erode the youthful resilience migrant teens bring with them to Canada.

Implications:

This study supports earlier research that argues we are failing to provide adequate supports to prevent more immigrant and refugee teens from sub-Saharan Africa from falling through the cracks in the current patchwork system of programs and services in Metro Vancouver. Five key policy recommendations emerge: 1) The importance of early intervention, such as high school orientation programs to orient migrant youth and parents to the Canadian school system and youth culture; 2) More resources put into the school system to ensure the individualized responses African adolescents require to be challenged and supported to work up to their full potential; 3) Building on the resilience of African adolescents requires programming and services that foster dense networks of relationships such as mentorship programs and increased opportunities for African youth to come together; 4) Programs and activities should draw more on African cultural traditions, including the performing arts, to build self-confidence, self–esteem and empowerment that helps adolescents navigate the pitfalls of North American youth culture; 5) Developing programs that are responsive to community needs requires spaces for the co-creation of knowledge linked to non-hierarchical African traditions of knowledge generation and translation.