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

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Working Paper Series

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

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how adolescent immigrants and refugees from countries in sub-Saharan Africa negotiate settlement in Metro Vancouver. 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. The key questions addressed in this research 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? Our findings show that 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 while drawing on parental supports and African cultural values to develop gendered strategies to overcome difficulties. The experiences of these teens provide 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.

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Adolescence is a time of significant transition for everyone, as young men and women negotiate shifts from childhood to adulthood in the context of culturally embedded norms of gender, sexuality, family, peers, schooling, work and civil society. Hence adolescence is a particularly unsettling time to simultaneously traverse the dislocations and challenges associated with international migration. Immigrants and refugees who arrive in Canada during their teen years must, in a very short time, acquire new cultural and social capital required to effectively navigate adulthood in a context as unfamiliar to their parents as to themselves (and, hence, with less knowledgeable guidance from parents), while simultaneously engaging with the strong influences of peers and popular culture.

For migrant teens from sub-Saharan Africa these transitions are further complicated by new processes of racialization encountered in Canada. As studies of African immigrant youth have documented, learning to adjust to life in Canada includes learning to 'become Black' and 'act Black', processes that are mediated through the history of immigration and racialization in Canada and through dominant forms of African-American youth culture such as music, films, clothing, and 'Black stylized English' (Ibrahim 1999; Kelly 1998; 2004). These influences create additional points of tension between African immigrant and refugee youth and their parents, teachers, and other authority figures in Canada.

Not surprisingly, settlement agencies that work with migrants from sub-Saharan Africa have identified youth who arrived in Canada during their teen years, and especially those who are refugees, as a sector of the African community who face particular challenges and require more support than currently

available in Metro Vancouver (Francis 2010). For example, although there is no empirical tracking of school completion rates by ethnic origin[1], those who work with African youth observe high dropout rates, in turn making transition to employment, and indeed adult responsibility, more difficult. In addition, research in Toronto suggests that families with teenage members at the time of migration appear prone to significant family disruptions that can affect integration of all members (Reitsma 2001).

This paper reports on research the authors have undertaken with Umoja Operation Compassion Society/African Family Services[2], an immigrant settlement agency operating in Surrey, BC. that works largely with women and children from sub-Saharan Africa. This paper begins to address the challenges facing African teen migrants, as well as the strategies they have developed to cope with those challenges. We focus less on the barriers and service gaps encountered by African immigrant and refugee youth, patterns that have recently been documented in other Metropolis research (Francis 2010), and more on the ways in which teen migrants from sub-Saharan Africa navigate the multiple and complex transitions encountered as part of settling in Metro Vancouver. In this paper, we are particularly interested in exploring these issues from the point of view of teen migrants to better understand the strengths and strategies drawn on to address the challenges faced. We place the teens' perspectives in a broader context of observations raised by parents and service providers, and consider policy recommendations that will support teen migrants own strengths and strategies.

SITUATING TEEN MIGRANTS FROM SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA IN METRO VANCOUVER

Immigrants and refugees from sub-Saharan African countries constitute one of the smallest yet most diverse groups in Metro Vancouver. Nearly 1.3% of the population (27,260 people) identified as African-born in the 2006 Census, with 80% originating from countries in Eastern and Southern Africa (Masinda and Kambere 2008; Statistics Canada, Community Profiles 2006 Census). About two-thirds of 1% of the population proclaimed an African ethnic origin, and less than 1% of all Vancouverites (20,670 people) identified as Black in 2006 (Statistics Canada, Special Interest Profiles, 2006 Census). The importance of place in shaping the nature of integration is clear when we compare Metro Vancouver with Toronto, where the Ghanaian community alone is well over 20,000 people (Manuh 2003). And although there has been a Black community presence since the colonial inception of Vancouver and British Columbia (Compton 2001), it has remained very small compared to other racialized communities. In this context of small numbers and hyper-visibility in a diverse population that is largely European and Asian in origin, the new African diaspora in Metro Vancouver has begun to self-identify as a diverse pan-'African community'; a community that experiences significant marginalization and racism, while simultaneously building new spaces of belonging (Creese 2010; 2011; Creese and Weibe, in press).

Growing up between or across cultures means that immigrant youth navigate paths quite distinct from, and often in conflict with, their parents (Berry et al. 2006; Handa 2003). These generational tensions are much in evidence in Vancouver's new African diaspora, as in other communities, with Canadian cultural values of individuality, self-expression, and autonomy frequently colliding with African values of authority, respect, and deference based on age,

family status, and gender (Arthur 2000; Creese 2011; Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001). Qualitative research on immigrant youth in Canada shows that youth mediate divergent cultural expectations in unique ways compared to adults, and often develop situational and racialized 'hybrid' identities as they negotiate belonging (Berry et al. 2006; Handa 2003; Pratt 2004; 2008). To date, research on African immigrant youth in Canada has focused on racialization processes of 'becoming Black' and 'acting Black' mediated through African-American youth culture such as music videos, rap, hip-hop, films, sports figures, styles of dress and linguistic tropes (Abdel-Shehid 2005; Ibrahim 1999; Kelly 1998, 2004; Okeke-Iherjirika and Spitzer 2005; Plaza 2006). Kelly (2004) refers to this as "borrowed identities" because it is so heavily influenced by American popular culture as the only space where African-Canadian youth can see themselves reflected bodily.

Youth who arrive in their teens experience an even more difficult transition compared to those who come as young children; this is particularly the case for child refugees, who have experienced significant trauma and may have no prior formal education, but are placed in age-based grades in Canada (Francis 2010; ISS of BC 2009). Overall, the children of immigrants in Canada have higher educational attainment than other Canadian youth. A recent national study by Statistics Canada (Abada, Hou and Ram 2008), for example, found that children of African immigrants have higher rates of university attainment than children of Canadian-born parents, though lower than some other immigrant groups (such as Chinese). However, the sample of African immigrant children in this study is predominantly white (49%) and 'other visible minority' (37%), with only 14% of the sample identifying as Black. We do not have any comparable data on patterns of educational attainment among Black African immigrants in Vancouver, but high dropout rates among African youth are a

great concern in a community that stresses higher education and recognizes its importance for social mobility in Canada (Francis 2010). Many African immigrant parents express fears that they might 'lose' their children, particularly their sons, if they reject African identity and values and thereby compromise future prospects by dropping out of school or, in worst case scenarios, getting involved in criminal behaviour (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001; Creese 2011).

A recent national study on the needs of immigrant and refugee children and youth identified twelve issues that present particular settlement challenges for youngsters (Chuang 2009). These challenges include: learning a new language; peer relationships and 'fitting in'; negotiating the Canadian school system; difficulty accessing programs that facilitate integration; understanding Canadian norms and expectations; aggressive or delinquent behavior; redefining parent-child relationships; poverty; post-traumatic stress and other mental health issues; parent-child separation anxiety (particularly among young refugee children); strict parental discipline; and racism and discrimination. These complex and interconnected challenges confronting teen newcomers are recognized by immigrant settlement agencies, but effective programming is often stymied by piecemeal and inadequate funding within the sector, which means that there are limited services directed at immigrant teens (Chuang 2009; Francis 2010; ISS of BC 2009; Kilbride and Anisef 2001). A recent study of programs and services for African youth in Metro Vancouver identifies a series of "missing links" between the needs of African immigrant and refugee youth and access to information and services, particularly related to employment, education, and social adjustments that lead to "negative forms of integration, or social exclusion" (Francis 2010,85). As one Ontario study of 'at risk' newcomer youth (Killbride and Anisef 2001) points out, the situation of teen migrants cannot be artificially separated from the larger fa-

milial relations in which they are embedded. More extensive support for families in transition, including financial and employment support, is critical for mitigating inter-generational conflict and providing the secure foundation that helps teens avoid 'high risk' behavior such as dropping out of school (Killbride and Anisef 2001,54). The strong correlation between education and employment opportunities leads to a "crisis" for those who "enter secondary schools in BC as teenagers and leave before achieving basic literacy and numeracy" (ISS of BC 2009,1).

The gendered nature of generational tensions and adaptation strategies must also be recognized. For example, scholars have pointed out that while boys from sub-Saharan Africa are more likely to replicate US-dominated images of Black masculinity through youth culture and sports (Abdel-Shehid 2005; Ibrahim 1999), girls face stricter parental controls, tend to focus more on school, and struggle to find "a definition of a good girl agreeable to both parents and daughter" (Okeke-Iherjirika and Spitzer 2005, 216; also Jacquet et al. 2008). Our research is therefore sensitive to gendered differences as it explores teens' own perceptions of how they negotiate settlement, the recognized strengths they draw on, and the strategies they employ to succeed.

METHODOLOGY

A series of focus groups was conducted in the spring of 2009 with high school students who migrated from sub-Saharan Africa during their teen years and had been in Canada for at least one year. We obtained consent from youth and their parents prior to the focus groups. In addition to youth, we conducted focus groups with parents of teen migrants, and key informant interviews with those who work with African youth in a professional capacity. All focus group participants received a $25 gift card in compensation for their time.

Recruitment posters were distributed in locations where African youth might congregate. These sites included 3 high schools in Burnaby and Surrey that have identifiable African student populations, settlement agencies oriented toward African immigrants and refugees (Umoja and the Centre for Integration of African Immigrants), African churches in the Lower Mainland[3], and community centres and soccer fields. In addition, we contacted the Burnaby School Board, school principals, and youth workers and settlement workers in schools with a request to pass on recruitment notices to potential participants.

Twenty-one African youth (13 girls and 8 boys) participated in five focus groups. Three focus groups were mixed gender, and one of each was all female and all male. Participants in four focus groups were enrolled in high school in grades 10, 11, and 12; one of these was conducted in French and the rest in English. A fifth group was comprised of young men and women who had recently completed high school. The teen migrants originated from a wide range of countries in sub-Saharan Africa (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: YOUTH, COUNTY OR ORIGIN

Burundi	3
DR Congo	2
Eretria	1
Ethiopia	1
Liberia	3
Mauritius	1
Nigeria	3
Rwanda	2
Sierra Leon	1
Somalia	1
Sudan	3
Total	21

All of the youth had been in Canada for at least one year at the time of the research, and 85% had been here for 3 years or more (see Table 2). Thus,

most had moved past the most difficult adjustments that typically occur in the first few months and years and had time to develop different coping skills and to reflect on what was and was not working well for them. More than two-thirds of our research participants had arrived in Canada as refugees, and just under one-third came with family as independent immigrants (see Table 3). Some of these youth had lived in refugee camps for several years where they had little access to formal schooling; others attended schools in their countries of origin, and used that as a point of comparison for negotiating schools in Canada.

TABLE 2: YOUTH, YEARS IN CANADA

YEARS	PERCENTAGE
1-2	15%
3	35%
4	25%
5	20%
6	5%

TABLE 3: YOUTH, CLASS OF IMMIGRATION[4]

IMMIGRATION CLASS	PERCENTAGE
Refugee	69%
Independent	31%

The experiences of youth from sub-Saharan Africa were also explored through focus groups with parents of teen migrants. In these focus groups the aim was to learn about parent's perceptions of the challenges, coping strategies, and strengths that African youth exhibit as part of the settlement process in Metro Vancouver. We conducted 3 focus groups with a total of 13 mothers. Although we also sought the participation of fathers, we were unable to recruit any fathers for our focus groups. Like the teenage participants, the mothers came from a wide range of countries in sub-Saharan Africa (see Table 4). All

parents had been in Canada for at least 3 years, and nearly two-thirds (62%) had lived here for at least 4 years at the time of the research (see Table 5). A much larger proportion of mothers than youth in this study came to Canada as refugees: 85% of mothers compared to 64% of youth (see Tables 3 and 6). The over-representation of participants who arrived as refugees may reflect greater challenges faced during settlement generating more desire to partici-pate in the research.

TABLE 4: PARENTS, COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Burundi	1
DR Congo	3
Ghana	1
Liberia	2
Nigeria	1
Rwanda	1
Sierra Leon	1
Somalia	1
Sudan	2
Total	13

TABLE 5 PARENTS, YEARS IN CANADA

YEARS	PERCENTAGE
1-2	0%
3	38%
4	38%
5 or more	24%

TABLE 6: PARENTS, CLASS OF IMMIGRATION

CLASS OF IMMIGRATION	PERCENTAGE
Refugee	85%
Independent Immigrant	15%

In addition to focus groups with teens and parents, we also interviewed 12 key informants who work with African youth in a professional capacity. Interviews were conducted with 2 school principals, 1 teacher, 2 school youth workers, 2 school settlement workers, 2 settlement workers located outside of schools, 1 pastor who has a 'street ministry', and 2 community activists who do volunteer work with African youth. Two of these interviews were conducted in French and the rest were conducted in English. These three sources of data - focus groups with youth, focus groups with mothers of teenagers, and interviews with key informants - serve as points of triangulation for understanding the experiences, strengths, and coping strategies of teen migrants from sub-Saharan Africa.

CHALLENGES FACING TEEN MIGRANTS

Parents and professionals who work with teens generally agreed on the nature of the challenges faced by youth from sub-Saharan Africa.[5] These challenges can be clustered into two main categories: first, challenges related to a 'culture clash' between African and Canadian norms and values, including the influence of adolescent popular culture; and second, structural conditions affecting integration, including the organization of the local school system.

The most important issue for mothers of teenagers was the clash they perceived between African and Canadian cultures. As Agnes expressed it, with much affirmation from other mothers in the focus group, African parents were 'caught in the middle':

> It's really, really hard for the parents to bring them up because you're faced
> with two cultures. [Other voices: yes!] You're faced with a culture back
> home and the new culture. [Other voices: yes!] And then the government,
> they tell you don't do this. [Other voices: Don't do this!] You have to do this.
> So you're caught in the middle. The social workers are coming, you're not

supposed to talk [loudly] to your child, [Other voices: yes!] how is your child treated? "How are you treated at home by your parent? If you're not given this, this is what you should do." So these are very conflicting areas that you're faced with (Agnes[6], parent's focus group 1).

The 'culture clash' that mothers identified focused largely on different expectations about deference to and respect toward adults, and the scope of disciplinary control that parents exert in relation to offspring. Once in Canada, their children absorbed the formal and 'hidden curriculum' in schools and from popular culture that emphasizes greater individualism, independence, autonomy, and children's rights. As one youth worker suggested, when these values are stressed and "the school criticizes everything that parents do…you find the children start thinking that what we're being taught at home is not right" and then they won't listen to their parents (Interview 12). Lessons about children's rights are taught in school and monitored by social workers and police officers. Fear of state intervention is heightened by the common practice of offspring dialing 911, not because they are in danger (as they are instructed to do in school), but to resist discipline of any kind (Creese 2011). For example, Anna relayed the story of the police arriving at her door because her daughter dialed 911 when Anna turned off the television to get her daughter to go to bed (focus group 6). Fear of state intervention left many parents feeling unable to discipline their children, and lack of discipline was blamed for "losing your child" to negative influences ranging from staying out late at night to dropping out of school and using drugs . Hence, for mothers, the 'culture clash' could be distilled as too much freedom and not enough discipline in Canada, undermining the type of parental control that African parents associated with proper parenting.

Processes of transition associated with migration contributed to generational tensions as well. The pace of integration into Canadian culture is typically much quicker for adolescents than for adults. Children learned colloquial English more quickly than their parents and translating for or correcting their parents reversed usual parent-child relationships and authority (Interview 12). "The parents become like the kids, and the kids take charge because of the language proficiency" (Interview 5). Mothers struggled with how to raise their children according to their own cultures, while also recognizing sons and daughters needed to fit into Canadian society. As Carol commented, for example, "I have to understand now my kids, they don't only have our culture… so now I have to balance to make it equal, to accept the culture in Canada" (focus group 5). This was not an easy transition to make, however, and parents who arrived in Canada with teenagers in tow did not have the luxury of time to help them make adjustments in parenting practices.[7]

Most youth quickly embraced North American popular culture while trying to 'fit in' with their peers. Youth culture in North America is saturated with music, videos, images, and practices that valorize adolescent autonomy, independence from adults, materialism, sexuality, and risk-taking linked to alcohol and drugs. According to the mothers in our focus groups, the values expressed in this youth culture could not have been more antithetical to adolescent behavior expected in their countries of origin. Mothers worried about drugs and alcohol, particularly in relation to their sons, and sexual promiscuity and pregnancy in relation to their daughters. Emphasis on materialism and conspicuous consumption, the search for early independence from the family home, or the need to contribute to low family incomes lead many African teens to early employment. Employment options for teens are typically in low-wage service sector jobs that do not promise bright career prospects. Nevertheless,

such employment detracted attention from their studies and contributed to decisions to drop out of school and/or low academic achievement with long-term consequences for post-secondary options (Interviews 3, 12). For boys in particular, the lure of easy money could also lead to involvement with criminal activity (Interview 7). Parents tended to see these problems as emanating from "bad influences" of their peers (focus groups 1, 5, 6).

Other structural conditions also affected integration of African teens. Family poverty was a key one, since it shaped immediate and long-term abilities to pursue education conducive to better career options (focus group 1; Interviews 5, 8, 12). The organization of the school system also presented significant barriers to success. The practice of placing students in age-based grades, rather than assessing their academic background, put refugee teens that may have had little access to formal education, and anyone who was not already fluent in English, at a particular disadvantage. In addition, ESL training assumed literacy in a first language, a foundation missing for many refugee teens, and schools lacked appropriate materials to teach literacy to teenagers (Interviews 8, 11). Moreover, adolescents kept in ESL classes for too long, or unable to take the general curriculum, became discouraged (Focus group 6). Not surprisingly, this situation has a negative impact on African teen's self-esteem. As Barbara explained, for her son this 'humiliation' was instrumental in fostering risk behavior that included taking drugs: "Before the child will be fluent in English they suffer a lot. You know, it's sort of like humiliation…when they feel humiliated, like they want a way of, like, feeling good" (focus group 1). In addition, in direct contrast to practices in African countries, the culture of schooling in Canada is premised on self-motivation rather than external discipline, making it easier for students who are not highly motivated to adopt a complacent attitude toward their education (Interviews 2, 6).

Expectations that parents should be actively involved in their offspring's education also posed difficulties for parents and teens. Such involvement was not typical in African countries. Many parents were unable to help with their children's homework, either because they did not know the material (particularly those with weak English skills), or because both parents worked multiple jobs to make ends meet (Interviews 5, 12). Financial and time pressures also made childcare a problem, so older daughters often had responsibility for caring for younger siblings, limiting girls' ability to take part in homework clubs or other programs (Interviews 2, 5, 8). Finally, both mothers and professionals working with African teens pointed to the problem of racism within schools:

> Sometimes our kids, they go to school and then they found out some other kids call them names. I had that problem with my children and then they were calling him 'monkey' because he's Black. He was so mad and instead of suspend[ing] only the kids who were making trouble they suspend my child and then the other kids [are] still going to school. The next day he became the same problem and my son was mad and he hit that kid. They're supposed to do something to stop that name-calling 'monkey', 'Black', 'you're ugly' bla bla bla. And also the teacher, there's something going around. They don't try to punish, let's say punish the kids who call the other kids names… I want the government to try to help, to help our kids to feel comfortable at school. Then that one can make our kids to continue going to school (Linda, Focus group 5).

Teachers' failure to step in and stop racism and other forms of bullying was a common complaint among mothers (Focus group 1, 5, 6). A youth worker argued that African students fear that if they complain about discrimination to a white adult they run the further risk of being redefined as the problem (Interview 1). For African youth, then, racism and lack of trust creates an

environment that damages self-esteem, fosters disillusionment, and can contribute to strategies of withdrawal rather than engagement in school.

TEEN STRATEGIES: 'YOU HAVE TO STAND UP FOR YOURSELF'

In the face of significant challenges, participants also identified many strengths exhibited by teens from sub-Saharan Africa. These strengths include personal qualities such as resilience, courage, motivation, hardworking, determination, perseverance, enthusiasm, willingness to try new things, build strong relationships and stand up and fight for their rights (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 11, 12). Attributes common to African cultures were also identified as strengths that youth could draw on, including the values of respect, listening, discipline, hard work, and the love, encouragement, and examples set by their parents (Focus groups 1, 5; Interviews 1, 3, 12).

Other studies have also noted the remarkable resilience of migrant teens, particularly those who have experienced forced dislocations and trauma as refugees (Chuang 2009; Francis 2010; ISS of BC 2009; Killbride and Anisef 2001). In this section we explore how this resilience is manifested in the lives of teen migrants from sub-Saharan Africa as they carve out spaces for themselves in Metro Vancouver. Drawing on two single-gender focus groups as key points of departure, one with 6 girls and the other with 4 boys, we explore the gendered strategies teens identified to negotiate challenges that mothers, teachers, youth workers, and settlement workers recognized pose risks associated with long-term social exclusion in Canada.

African teens demonstrated a keen understanding of the challenges they encountered, and their discussions resonated strongly with the issues identified by parents and service providers. Rather than dwell on the challenges, however, adolescents in our research focused on their own agency. A key

theme in our focus groups with African teens was the importance of learning to 'stand up for yourself' in order to successfully navigate new circumstances and expectations. Since high school formed a big part of their lives, it was not surprising that focus group participants emphasized negotiating expectations, demands, and challenges in school. The need to 'stand up for yourself' was discussed both vis-à-vis peers and teachers. For boys, the importance of 'standing up' was linked largely to interactions with peers. For girls, it was more often linked to their relationships with teachers and systemic practices of underestimating what they were capable of accomplishing.

Boys most often linked strategies of 'standing up' to the struggle to acquire respect from their peers. Failure to 'stand up' was to let others push them around, whether literally or figuratively.

> Like if you don't want to be taken for granted like you have to make sure you're above whatever [is] normal. You get picked on a lot. So you have to be strong for your own self. Like, you have to, you know, stand up for own self, ya. So you have to, like [be] above whatever. If the high school level is like 5, you have to be like 10. So you know, they're going to be, you know, they will respect you kind of thing. So you have to do like do extra work to get respect. (Eddie, Focus group 4).

The social hierarchy in high schools makes earning respect from other boys particularly important. Disrespect can be displayed in taunting, isolation, and/or physical violence. The boys in our focus groups experienced all of these outcomes at various times, especially when they arrived in Canada and had no idea how to navigate new cultural codes, normative teen behavior, and colloquial English. African students who did not know English prior to settling in Metro Vancouver (or French for those in local French-speaking high schools) had the additional burden of learning a new language. Even fluent English speakers from Commonwealth Africa (such as Simon, from Nigeria) faced

problems similar to their English-speaking parents as their accents served not only as markers of difference but markers of 'inferior English' (Creese, 2010; 2011).

> Like they don't understand you, like 'what are you talking about? Just shut up.' Sometimes you see, like when you talk like in the class, when you're talking, you'll see, some other group [of] people laughing, making fun of you [Interviewer: Oh my god!] because [of] the word you can't pronounce. The way they pronounce this is different from ours (Simon, Focus group 4).

Most of our research participants spent the first few years in ESL classes. As we discuss more below, 'standing up for yourself' was sometimes necessary just to move out of ESL and into the regular classroom. How boys might 'stand up' in the local context was a skill most needed to learn quickly.

> What I was trying to say, you know, like then, when we just came we didn't know nothing. So the youth, they like, they ride after; it's like a slang, like they ride on us, and we didn't know how to actually cope with the system, like, to fit in (Paul, focus group 4).

> Down here it's like you have to, you know, feel like as if [you must keep] watching your back. It's not that easy (Eddie, focus group 4).

Patterns of peer interaction brought from their countries of origin were often not appropriate because they were embedded in very different cultural and social relations. This was especially true for anyone who had lived through war, dislocation, and/or refugee camps where survival strategies that kept them safe were problematic in the Canadian context (ISS of BC 2009; Chuang 2009; Killbride and Anisef 2001). Hence, part of learning to make new friends and to 'fit in' in local high schools also involved new strategies of dealing with peer pressure and bullying. Responding to taunts or threats with too much aggression could be just as dangerous for African teenage boys as being too passive. Passivity could enhance becoming a target, but too much aggression

could lead to trouble with authorities. Boys described walking a fine line between 'defending yourself' and learning to be 'humble', 'mellow', and 'cautious' because they quickly learned that youthful confrontations were not mediated on a level playing field. African youth argued that when conflict occurred, authorities, whether teachers or police, typically assumed they, and not their opponent, were the cause of the problem.

> The difficult thing is like when you get in a fight with, at school, maybe I'm just saying, like, with a white guy and they call the cops. They won't let you speak. They will let the other guy, white guy, speak first. Then they know what to do and even though the white is the one that caused the problem, they will find a way to like, get him out of trouble. [Paul: And won't believe you.] Believe me on that (Mike, focus group 4).

Navigating the minefields of adolescence also meant learning what it means to be a young Black man in Metro Vancouver, and the ways in which racialization affects other people's responses to their behaviour.

African teenage boys in our focus groups identified interactions with the police as central to learning how to be Black men in Canada. This was not something that girls reflected on. These stories involved recognition of different treatment by customs agents and border guards when returning to Canada, the way police respond to minor driving infractions (such as failure to put the 'N' for new driver in the rear window), or the practice of being questioned by the police for no apparent reason.

> I had the same situation, same you know, cause there was one time for example, I was standing in front of my school and like, after school. So my friend lives in front of the school, so I was standing there talking to my friend and suddenly, we saw the cops like, you know. They stopped, they came, 'why are you standing there?'...And I said, 'what do you mean, like, what's going on?' And they were like, 'we got a call from the neighbours that there are some people, some strange people in front of their house.'

> You know, I was pretty surprised out there, like, this is my friend's house
> and this is my school down here. Like, why, you know? Why do you think,
> why do they think we're strange? Is that because I was Black? (Eddie, focus
> group 4).

As Paul commented in response to Eddie's anecdote, "even though you're a good person, they just treat you as one of the bad persons, like you know Black people as gang-related people, like drugs" (focus group 4). Such experiences made African teenage boys more cautious in their interactions with authorities, especially the police, and undermined their sense of belonging.

One of the more positive stereotypes about young Black men is that they excel at sports. For those boys in our focus groups who were good athletes, playing on school teams was one way to raise their status within peer groups and to help them 'fit in' at school. Dedication to athletics had the added advantage of demonstrating a willingness to work hard, both physically in perfecting their skills in sport and in their school work, since passing is generally a precondition for remaining on a school team. Some boys noted how their position as a school athlete contributed to good relationships with their teachers. As Simon commented:

> As long as you are nice, like as long as you're responsible student then the
> teacher is gonna take you, depend[ing] on who you are. They don't see the
> color in you; they don't look at the color. They look at the person you are.
> And then they'd be nice to you. That's not all teachers, but I have a lot of
> teachers who like me. Like, they say, I'm an athlete, that I must play bas-
> ketball no matter what, I'll always play. So they like me because the work,
> like the hard work I go through (Simon, focus group 4).

Simon believed that his good rapport with most teachers was premised on his athletic ability and demonstrated hard work, leading teachers to 'look at the person you are' rather than the colour of his skin. This begs the question of

whether his hard work would be recognized in the absence of his athletic abilities. The girls' experiences with teachers who underestimated their academic abilities suggest it might not.

Adolescent relationships are highly gendered so it is not surprising that there were significant differences in the contexts of their struggles to 'fit in' at school, the specific issues that were seen as problematic, and strategies developed by boys and girls. A main point of similarity, however, was that 'standing up for yourself' was a central strategy for successfully navigating the transitions linked to migration. For boys, 'standing up' was most salient in terms of relations between peers, and an important skill was learning the most appropriate ways to stand up without eliciting censure from authorities, particularly in the context of racialized policing. In contrast, several girls in our focus groups talked about 'standing up for yourself' in the context of teachers who systematically underestimated their academic abilities and thereby limited their scholastic accomplishments and future opportunities. These practices were interpreted through processes of racialization that participants believed shaped their teachers expectations for different students. The following exchange between Jane and Emily highlights their frustration with an education system that, in their experience, was holding them back rather than fostering fuller integration and a brighter future:

> I also find it really difficult because in some cases they think like S. said, because you're from Africa you're uneducated or something. And so they immediately put you in a lower place…And so when they put you in those lower [class] levels you just feel insecure of being able to do anything. And so you just don't try and that's when they assume that oh, something is going wrong at home or you're not getting enough food or something. But the case is, they just assume that you're uneducated and just put you in the lower class when they can just put you with the regular people (Jane, focus group 3).

> As she just said, I'm actually facing the same problem in my school. We are about 4 Africans and we are in grade 12. But unfortunately we will graduate but we'll not have [an academic] diploma that from grade 8 we've been asking for them to give us. Like those courses that will take us to college or university. But they refused. They said that the education over here, it's not the same as Africa so we need help. We said, we don't need help, just give us what they [regular students] are doing, and we can do it. Just give it to us; we believe we can do it. But they keep on saying, 'no you can't, we know you can't'. We tried to talk to them and they keep on refusing as well. So we booked an appointment at VCC [Vancouver Community College]. We went and looked [at] the program. They have everything we have missed, so we will take it for free when we finish high school. We'll go there and finish our high school there (Emily, focus group 3).

As Jane pointed out in her comments, when African teens did perform poorly it was typically assumed that 'something is going wrong at home' rather than low achievement being tied to how African teens are located within the school system.

These girls did not find the simple material presented at school to be challenging, and yet even when they finished the work very quickly this didn't seem to lead their teachers to provide more advanced material. As Jane put it "what I find really funny is that even though the teachers tell you, 'oh no you can't do it', they don't make the effort to teach you how to do it". If students are unable to register in courses that are prerequisite for post-secondary education, their future career choices are seriously constrained. Recognizing this, Emily had already decided to attend the adult education classes at Vancouver Community College (VCC) immediately after graduation to upgrade her high school diploma for entrance to local colleges and universities. She had already contacted VCC with hopes of transferring immediately out of grade 12 to adult education classes. However, to do so she needed permission from her high school principal, and the school refused her request.

The majority of African teenage girls and boys we spoke to were quite serious about their education and recognized its importance for their future prospects. That is why 'standing up' for themselves vis-à-vis low teacher expectations was so important. Unable to transfer to adult education immediately, Emily continued to insist that she be able to take some of the 4 courses she was missing for the academic stream. Eventually she was allowed to enroll in one of these courses and proved her capabilities.

> So they actually gave me one and it comes out I was there, I got the highest mark. I came the first in class like. I was so surprised! I mean I just started and I got the highest mark and all the teachers were 'what?' I was so happy. So standing up for yourself and just tell them that you can do it and go home, learn. We can do it...If you learn you'll get where you want to go (Emily, focus group 3).

As Jane pointed out in the focus group discussion, Emily's success not only disproved expectations that 'Black children' cannot do well in school, it also provided a role model for other African youth to stand up for themselves to get what they need from the school system.

Anita also recalled being held back in undemanding classes, in her case English-as-second-language classes that prevented her from pursuing more demanding academic courses. She also had to advocate for herself and insist she have access to classes in the regular stream. In her case the school complied, and she too demonstrated her capabilities.

> I was in ESL for like four years. Now I stood up for myself. I told the teachers that I don't want to do ESL no more. So I am doing regular [classes]. So ya, the teacher now knows that I'm doing very well because it's my first time in regular and I'm in grade 10. So I passed by 67. So the teachers were so surprised about it and they were like, 'oh, we didn't know that you could do it'. I was like, well, you should give us chances because you don't know (Anita, focus group 3).

In these instances the girls learned skills of self-advocacy that can be crucial for navigating large high schools that lean toward standardized bureaucratic procedures often with limited resources to fully assess or tailor individualized programs for migrant teens. Most were placed on a trajectory of low expectations almost guaranteed to produce low academic achievement with life-long consequences for successful integration. With professional careers that require university education considered out of reach, participants told us that counselors directed African girls toward 'hair stylist or braiding hair or dancing', which they found demeaning, and actively discouraged goals of becoming doctors, nurses, teachers or other professionals. Forging an alternative path was premised on the personal strength to ignore discouraging advice, to learn effective self-advocacy, and to work hard in school to succeed. As Laura, who describes herself as an 'A' student, advised: "if you're strong and you feel you're a good student, you can be able to like pass anything… So pay attention and pass" (focus group 3).

Like the boys, African teenage girls also discussed peer pressure and racism from other students. However, unlike the boys, strategies of standing up for themselves vis-à-vis other students often involved recourse to teachers for support. Laura (focus group 3) described how the stereotype of Africans as poor students led some classmates to accuse her of cheating when she got top marks. She "went to the teacher and asked him to show them my notes" to prove that the work was hers and was pleased that her teacher supported her. She also elicited the support of friends to verify that she "works really hard". On the other hand Sara (focus group 3) told a story about her sister whose peers taunted her by saying "we don't need Black people in this school". Her sister's complaints to a teacher and her mother's visit to the principal failed to elicit a response because they "didn't believe her". Sara concluded: "So if the

teachers don't listen to us, who's gonna help us?" Clearly, informing teachers was not always an effective strategy for dealing with racialized harassment, and the girls perceived teachers to be part of the problem. As this exchange between Laura and Jane illustrates, the difficulty of getting teachers to take their concerns seriously, or worse yet to imply they are making it up to excuse poor work habits, makes schools a less welcoming and safe environment for African teens.

> It's like they are not willing to accept that there is racism going on in the school and that there are people being discriminated [by] other kids. And it's like they don't want to accept it, they don't want to hear it because they just want to think, 'oh, everything is ok, everything is perfect'. But it's not. There are people talking about other people. There is comment being made about your skin colour and it's not really easy to [speak to] an adult, you know, and tell them because you don't think that they are going to believe you. You don't think that they are going to actually tell, like, do something about it. So you just keep it inside. (Laura, focus group 3)

> And [if a student] goes to complain that someone is being discriminative or teachers also being discriminative, they don't want to believe it because they think, 'oh, this one is another Black student to come and complain about our teachings or the way we are processing the school'. So they just think, you know, because you have your problems you just want to blame it on the teachers that they are not doing good job. They don't want to believe that what you're saying is true. (Jane, focus group 3).

Not all experiences at school were so discouraging for the girls in our research. They also identified supportive elements, including one school that had two African youth workers who ran programs specifically for African teens, whom students could go to if they had problems; another that ran an African homework club where they could get extra help; and 2 schools ran anti-bullying workshops that involved creating and performing plays about bullying, experiences that the girls found empowering.

BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

> [My parents] tell us, work hard, study hard, you know, be strong. Don't let any like, little comments break you down. Just keep working hard, keep going. You know what you're looking for. You know what you want in life. And just if you keep your mind to what [you're doing] you can do it. It's very good to have that support (Laura, focus group 3).

African teens who participated in this research built on strengths emanating from their own cultural backgrounds, parental supports, and individual drive and determination. Drawing on their parents' examples, migrant teens acknowledged the value of hard work "because we know we're hardworking back home, and that's going to help us in the future" (Simon, focus group 4). As Laura explained, she believed hard work was necessary to attain her aspirations and to belong in Canada:

> You know, we want to learn and we want to belong. We want to be a part and, you know, just proving it and working hard on it makes a difference (Laura, focus group 3).

For teens in our research, the value of hard work was explicitly connected to education. They were highly motivated to take high school seriously and understood how important access to post-secondary education was for future opportunities. For many of the girls, impediments in the way of academic success were largely structural, especially for those located within non-academic streams, and they developed self-advocacy skills to overcome these barriers. As youth workers and mothers reminded us, many African teenage boys also faced similar situations of being underestimated at school (Interviews 3, 6; Focus Groups 1, 5, 6). However, the boys in our research focused on different kinds of pitfalls they needed to avoid. African teenage boys, like the mothers in our focus groups, worried more about getting involved with the wrong friends

who will 'teach you bad stuff'. The following exchange highlights the dynamics of these temptations as boys negotiated trying to 'fit in' with their peers:

> Paul: It depends on the friend that you're working with. Some discourage you and, this is 'come join us' or 'come do this with us'. Go with them, they will teach you bad stuff... All they want to do is smoke, drink, party, something like that.

> Interviewer: So bad company (Paul: ya, ya) can influence you negatively? (Paul: ya). Have you come across some of your friends that have been trapped into that bad company?

> Eddie: Ya, and I'll say also like, your colour. It's going to kind of affect you a little. So you have to be, like, you know, like, extra strong, like, be above all, you know, normal level, like. Or you have to stand out, you have to like, if you're Black skin. (focus group 4).

For African teenage boys who were not able to perform 'above' their peers, whether through athletics, academics, or other attributes peers might value, fitting in was harder. As Eddie noted, this was especially so, because Black men were not esteemed in local racialized hierarchies. The appeal of drinking, drugs, and partying valorized in much of local youth culture might be particularly strong for African youth who were already discouraged at school, those who felt 'humiliated', to use Barbara's term (Focus Group 1), by their experiences in the school system and who faced significant barriers to academic success. For boys in our focus groups, watching some friends succumb to 'bad stuff' provided a lesson that reaffirmed the need to work hard and avoid the temptations that flowed from making choices that could culminate in poorer academic performance or dropping out of high school altogether.

 African teens in our research identified parental support as crucial for learning to 'fit in' while 'standing up' for themselves. This was particularly important for learning how to handle the everyday realities of racism experi-

enced by Black men and women in Vancouver. Paul mentioned getting advice from his father about how to interact with peers and police in Canada; his father took pains to point out that "this is not like back home", and learning to be 'mellow' rather than confrontational was advised as a way to avoid trouble (focus group 4). Girls tended to enlist parents to mediate problems encountered at school, helping to address issues ranging from getting into specific courses, or responding to instances of racism. As Laura explained, her dad also passed on explicit lessons from his own frustrations of trying to find work in Canada as a way to try to prepare his offspring for similar incidents they were likely to encounter:

> Sometimes he'd be discriminated against and he tells us, you see this is what happened. It's going to happen to you, don't think it only happens to me. And he tells like, you know, be strong, work hard at school, you know you're working for yourself. They want you to fail. They are not; yes some of them are there to help you. But they don't want you to succeed. So show them, prove to them that you can do it and work hard on it. Like, you know, they encourage me and my siblings (Laura, focus group 3).

This kind of instruction constituted a critical form of support that helped African youth deal with difficult experiences with peers, teachers, or other authorities. Beyond helping teens develop specific strategies to negotiate discrimination and achieve their goals, parents also helped to shore up their confidence when confronted with situations that were bound to challenge their self-esteem.

> Sometimes my mom tells me; don't take everything personally, you know, because people will say a lot of stuff. You need to know that. You need to like, bring out your shell you know. You know, you have a shield you know, bring out your shield. Those words will just bounce out and back to them, you know. If you show them that you don't care what they say, you know, just don't take what they say personally (Jane, focus group 3).

Since youth were not able to change the behavior of those around them, developing a hard 'shell' and learning not to internalize negative stereotypes and racist assumptions were key strategies employed to adjust to life in Canada.

Hence, the African teens in our study demonstrated their resilience on many levels. They built on pre-existing traditions of hard work and perseverance, internalized the value of higher education, set long-term goals for the future, learned to 'fit in' while 'standing up' for themselves, drew on parental supports and African cultural values, and tried not to internalize the slights associated with everyday racism, or to give up in the face of obstacles they met along the way. The teens we talked with were knowledgeable about the difficulties and potential pitfalls they continued to encounter, resourceful in developing useful strategies to navigate their social world, and possessed a strong sense of self-esteem. They successfully negotiated the 'culture clash' and enacted strategies to overcome the systemic disadvantages they encountered. Their experiences illustrate attributes that contribute to successful long-term integration of migrant teens, and provide a vantage point from which to recommend practices and programs that could help to shore up rather than erode the youthful resilience migrant teens bring with them to Canada.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our findings support earlier research in Metro Vancouver 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 (Francis 2010; ISS of BC 2009). Five key policy recommendations emerge that focus on supporting the strengths and strategies African youth employ to successfully navigate the challenges they face in Metro Vancouver.

1. The *importance of early intervention*, before youth are discouraged, is very clear. Early intervention is needed to prepare adolescents for the dislocations and frustrations of migration as teens are thrust into a school system and dominant youth culture that is antithetical to the values and norms in which they were raised, and in which the attainment of academic success is significantly challenged. Early intervention should include specialized orientation programs for refugee youth, and a high school-based orientation program for all migrant teens available before they enter the school system (Interviews 3, 8). High school orientation programs should include pairing new migrants with student mentors who can share strategies and experiences. Programs to orient parents to the Canadian school system and youth culture would also help to prepare parents before generational tensions develop with their offspring.

2. A key message from this research must be that *more resources are needed in the school system to ensure that migrant teens are challenged and supported to work up to their full potential*. An overburdened school system already stretched to capacity is not able to promote individualized responses to the needs and aspirations of migrant teens from sub-Saharan Africa. Yet this is what is required to build on their pre-existing commitments to higher education, limit the existing educational barriers, and enhance the confidence to successfully navigate adolescent youth cultures that can otherwise so easily discourage and sidetrack even the most resilient youth. African youth and service providers valued initiatives in place in a few schools: African settlement workers located within schools, homework clubs, and anti-bullying programs that empowered youth to be proactive. More such initiatives are needed, as is more anti-racist programing aimed at teachers and students. For refugee youth in particular, their academic

preparation should be assessed rather than routinely assigned to age-based grades, and language instruction needs to broaden from an ESL platform to a literacy platform in order to be effective (Interview 8). Students in non-academic streams should be encouraged rather than discouraged from attempting academic courses, perhaps through a 'challenge' system that does not penalize students who are not successful. As one settlement worker put it, "we [need to] better prepare them to build their confidence and self-esteem and give them tools that they themselves already have" rather than knock them down by immersing African youth in an education system that, at present, frustrates and discourages too many (Interview 8).

3. It is also clear that *building on the resilience of African teens requires programming and services that foster dense networks of relationships*. The local African community, settlement organizations, churches and schools can do more to help build these networks and relationships by establishing mentoring programs of various kinds: mentors in trades and apprenticeship programs to illustrate diverse career options; African role models, particularly male role models for teenage boys to mentor youth; and African university students mentoring senior high school students (Interviews 3, 8, 11, 12). As one African pastor noted, the African community needs to be fully involved in such programs. "We need to stand up and help our children. Nobody's going to do it, if we don't do it nobody's going to do it for us" (Interview 3). Recruiting more African teachers provides another important source of role models for youth (Focus Group 1). Increased programming for African youth also provides more opportunities to extend and deepen relationships among youth. Indeed, in many respects the relationships that develop by creating more opportunities for African youth

to come together are often more important for successful integration than the specific content of programing (Interview 3). To facilitate the involvement of more African teenage girls in youth programs, it is also essential to provide childcare so girls can be relieved of caring for their younger siblings (Interview 5, 8)

4. To be effective, *programs and activities for African youth should draw more on African cultural traditions, including the performing arts, to build pride, self-esteem and empowerment.* Performing arts can be particularly important to attract African youth who find English challenging. As one African service provider argued, storytelling, dance, and music can be "a means to integration" and, when used innovatively, a bridge across the generational divide (Interview 5). For example, she recalled a successful workshop, ostensibly on the topic of mental health, that illustrates this point:

I invited elders in the community, some elders, with the youths. They sat face to face...their elders started using proverbs and explaining it to them. The youths took notes and they took these proverbs, words, and formed lyrics of the rap, because they like rap music. And then they made this video (Interview 5).

This service provider went on to argue that funders of programs need to understand that such creative approaches can be much more ef-fective than preaching to youth about any specific issue (in this ex-ample, the benefits of mental health). *More flexible program funding* would allow service providers the freedom to design programs around whatever activities appeal to African youth, be it rap music, dancing, or playing soccer, while recognizing that integration is linked less to

specific information or activities, and linked more to collective partici-
pation and relationship-building that cultivates self-confidence, self-
esteem, and empowerment.

5. Finally, there is a *need to create more spaces for the co-creation of
   knowledge linked to non-hierarchical African traditions of knowledge
   generation and translation.* This implies fostering networks for ongoing
   dialogue between researchers, policy makers, youth, and other members
   of the African community to build consensus, disseminate information,
   and develop programming that is responsive to community needs.

As this research illustrates, African youth demonstrate considerable
strengths that can be nurtured to foster successful integration of teen mi-
grants. The benefits of working from their strengths are clear: enhancing the
confidence, self-esteem, and empowerment needed to successfully navigate
the school system and adolescent peer cultures that can otherwise so easily
discourage even the most resilient youth. The costs associated with failure to
provide adequate, timely, and effective supports for African teens and their
families are also clear: discouraged and disaffected youth become adults with
limited career paths and future prospects, impairing social cohesion in the
long term.

ENDNOTES

1 The Province of British Columbia does not collect any data on the ethnic origins or racialized identities of students, but it does collect data by 'language primarily used at home'. Home language can be useful for identifying some groups of migrant children, such as those who speak Tagalog (Philippines), Punjabi (Sikhs), and Mandarin and Cantonese (Chinese). However, migrants from Africa come from 54 countries and may speak one of 2,000 different languages (Jaquet et al. 2008), so there is no way to track their school performance using Ministry of Education data.

2 All the authors are connected to Umoja. Kambere and Masinda are joint co-Executive Directors of Umoja, and Creese is the volunteer President of the Board of Directors.

3 In 2010, we identified 13 'African Churches' in Metro Vancouver. These are churches with African pastors and congregations that came predominantly from countries in sub-Saharan Africa. It is estimated that approximately 90% of the local African community in the Lower Mainland are Christian (Creese 2011).

4 One teen did not indicate the class of arrival and is omitted from this table.

5 Although we did not hold any focus groups that put parents and professionals in direct conversation with each other, the research shows considerable agreement about the nature of the challenges that African youth face.

6 Pseudonyms are used to refer to all research participants.

7 Over the course of time, mothers were more likely than fathers to adopt new parenting styles that reflected the dual needs of their children to be African and Canadian. Fathers had more difficulty making this transition and tended to hang on to African expectations of strong parental authority and discipline as the only proper way to parent their children in Canada (see Creese 2011).

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