

Educational borders: The dilemma of schooling for African immigrants

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The following article is part of an Action Research study with a group of African immigrants in an urban Midwestern ESL facility. The article uses multiple theoretical frameworks as well as spiritual and linguistic foundations common among certain groups of African immigrants to expand and elaborate on the African immigrant experience in America. The study is divided into chapters depicted by headings in the Malian language Bambara that signify both important cultural and spiritual symbols as well as the individual portrayal of one Malian immigrant's educational story. The study focuses on the participatory methods used in the facility the student attended and the ways in which such methods allowed the student to both name and transform his own educational experience.

Sisan: Now (Bambara)

How did the world decide that we Africans have nothing meaningful to say about these important issues facing us: democracy and human rights? Lest our oppressors forget, we Africans have eyes to see, ears to hear, heads to analyze, and mouths to judge (Diarwara, 2003, p. 9).

It was the middle of a January in America when Toure Keita walked out of the shadows and into a small urban Midwestern public school to demand its services. Dressed in baggy jeans, work boots, a red and white hooded sweatshirt, and matching fitted baseball hat, Toure represented a style and manner typical of the Hip Hop era in America. "I am interested in becoming a citizen," he proclaimed to a handful of new and recent, mostly African, immigrants and a dumbfounded teacher.

This man had no need for the program's thousand-dollar textbook budget with colorful photos of happy Americans telling time, dressing themselves, and marking off the days of the week on a calendar. Nor did he need its sophisticated computer software with lifelike images and sounds of real Americans buying cars, pouring juice, and talking on telephones. Toure needed something much more specific, yet unimaginable to us Americans: he needed a sense of place and, like many of his counterparts; he turned to the public schools in search of this place.

It was my first day as an intern in this program and the possible beginning of what, I hoped, would be a fruitful qualitative research study on immigrants in urban areas. Yet, as silence came over the classroom, I knew that my role would somehow become murky in this study. As a researcher, I knew I had the experience of both an insider and an outsider. My past work with immigrant education in the U.S. and with West African high school students in Guinea-Bissau

had more than, I thought, prepared me to be an objective “observer”. Ultimately though, from Toure’s standpoint, my background did not separate me from my insider status in this country.

For the past seven years, he had been living in an undefined territory in the United States and, as a result, he had developed a keen understanding of the power systems that exist in America. “It’s almost like they don’t want us here. They are always trying to catch us,” he commented during a personal interview in February. “Like these tracking devices immigrants have to wear in Florida when they file. Why are we treated as criminals? We come here, we work, we send money to our families, and, eventually, we return to Africa. We pay taxes and bills, we are not criminals” (Personal Interview, February 25, 2005). Thus, in order to begin to define a new territory for himself in this country, he had to risk trusting an insider.

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) writes of this “border” state as one comparable to a state of dark transition between cultures and place:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 3).

Toure’s status as an immigrant student placed him in this state of “transition” that Anzaldúa speaks of and, for some reason, I happened to be there when he began to find the strength to push through to the other side. He is not unlike the many who enter classrooms every day in search of this “place” that both allows them to harbor a dream in this country while still honoring their own individual past. Yet, Toure’s noncompulsory status as an adult immigrant in America separates him from the millions of multi-national public school students who move in and out of noisy classrooms everyday. In both his demand of our resources and his refusal to be ignored, he brings into question the scope and responsibilities of the American system of education.

This story is both a tribute to Toure, who had a hand in its composition and revision, and also a tool by which to recognize the state of education in this country for others like Toure. His life as an immigrant who sees education as an access point for a transformation of self in the United States will serve in this article as a framework for understanding other adults like him who enter public service agencies and schools every day.

In *Pedagogy of hope*, Paulo Freire (1997) speaks of educational content. Freire admits that content does exist because without teacher there would be no pupil and vice versa, yet he also reflects on the power by which we choose the content and how that choice speaks to our positions of power and need as opposed to the students’ and communities’ desires for education (Freire, 1997, p. 109). In the public education context, the students who are non-compulsory are adults who have chosen education for whatever personal, socio-economic, or communal reasons. However, those who choose the content are not those students, but facilitators, teachers, and policy makers for adult education. In the sector of immigrant education, the lives of our students who are non-compulsory are so convoluted that we cannot possibly ignore their role in the educational process; without their needs, there would be no process. Freire (2001) states that “authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world” (Freire, 2001, p. 75). Thus, Toure becomes an example of how one program began to consider the student as neither “abstract” nor “unattached to the world” in which he lives (Freire, 2001, p. 75). Instead, a mutual consciousness began to develop, and without this partnership there would have been no mutual understanding.

Immigrant Students and Public Schools: What is the answer?

Contreras (2002) states that changes in immigration policies since the 1970s have led to an overwhelming increase of immigrant students in schools all over the country. "In 1990, there were more than 2.3 million immigrant students in U.S. schools and colleges, and that number has since increased" (Contreras, 2002). Yet, they are still not a priority for lawmakers and policy makers. Although not a significant portion of the U.S. school population, immigrant student populations are steadily growing in concentrated areas. As a result, they have become an unclear policy issue that is often overlooked and ignored. Because of this, immigrant students are largely dependent on the local resources their school system or community can offer them (Contreras, 2002). Clearly, public schools in concentrated urban areas (where immigrant families come first) are more likely to see shifts in educational services and expenditures due to increased immigrant needs.

According to the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey, younger students (typically under the age of twelve) often have a far less difficult time learning English and navigating the American cultural system than older students (high school age) (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Yet, a large number of the immigrant population is over the age of 18. "In 1990, there were about 25.5 million U.S. adults age 18 and older who spoke a language other than English at home, up from 17.9 million a decade earlier" (National Center For Education Statistics, 1998). All across urban areas in the United States, there are long lines for ESL classes and services for adults who know that their survival in the American economy is greatly impacted by their English proficiency and literacy levels.

It is primarily non-native English speakers with low levels of formal education who are truly disadvantaged by their lack of native English language skills. Non-native English speakers with little or no education, do not, on average, acquire high enough levels of English fluency and literacy to be able to obtain high paying managerial and professional occupations, or even to obtain jobs with regular hours and paychecks (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999).

As a result, the pressure on agencies both public and private to service adult ESL students is immense. However, because such programs are often limited by funding, highly qualified teachers who would otherwise choose work in the non compulsory sector of adult education, choose more stable positions in public elementary and secondary schools.

Nye: Before (Bambara)

We cannot educate if we don't start- and I said start and not stay- from the levels in which the people perceive themselves, their relationships with others and with reality, because this is precisely what makes their knowledge. . . The question is to know what they know and how they know, to learn how to teach them things which they don't know and they want to know. The question is to know whether my knowledge is necessary, because sometimes it is not necessary (Freire, 1990, p. 66).

As Toure stood resolutely in the middle of our silent classroom, I realized that, in Freire's (1990) words, our books, computer software, smiling faces, and most importantly, our knowledge was not necessary to him at that moment in time. Toure did not announce that he wanted to take the citizenship test, for which the program has all of the materials to prepare him. He asked us to help him become a citizen, which, from his perspective, was different than simply taking a test. "I do not want to live as another name anymore in this country," he said to me during one of our first conversations. "I want to be educated, to work, to rent an apartment under my name" (Personal Interview, January 8, 2005). Toure's name represents his Soninke heritage and his Malian

(Bambara) roots. Although he speaks both Bambara and Soninke, which are languages of two separate ethnic groups in Mali, he identifies more in the United States with Soninke, because it allows him to speak with other Soninke people from various countries in West Africa, thereby providing him with the necessary community for survival in America.

When he was seventeen, Toure fled Mali in search of a better education and life for himself. He applied for a passport in Niger under a different name and false age and was granted both the passport and a legitimate visa to the United States. His family raised the money for him to go to the United States on a business visa for six months. Toure landed in The Bronx in New York City and took residency in a SRO (single room occupancy hotel): a common type of housing for newly arrived and transitory West African immigrants. Paul Stoller (2002) writes the following about SRO's in New York City: "Housing is a central problem for West African immigrants in New York City. . . Conditions are often deplorable . . . leaks, urine, feces, roaches, trash and garbage in public access" (Stoller, 2002, p. 153). While living in the SRO, Toure worked with his cousins and uncles for the family business, which was in the Malian textile trade in New York City (Personal Interview, January 25, 2005). Toure continues to work in this trade at African American festivals each summer. Through this, he is able to subsidize his expenses in America.

Textile Trade and Undocumented Immigrants in Urban Areas:

Paul Stoller (2001) writes that at least one-half of all West African traders in New York City are part of around 5 million undocumented immigrants currently in the United States. "In reaction to economic downturns and political instability in West Africa, the majority of West African traders came to New York in the early 1990's" (Stoller, 2001, p. 655). Stoller (2001) also projects that many of these undocumented immigrants avoid public service organizations (hospitals, schools, social service agencies, etc.) out of fear that the INS will detain and deport them. This observation furthers the idea of the "border" culture that Anzaldúa (1999) discusses in her work.

At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory (pp. 100-101).

For many undocumented immigrants, the decision to straddle the two "mortal combatants" and, in some way heal the open wound existing between the two is too risky, both culturally and socially. As a result, they forge a new path across this border in which they live in the shadows of the mainstream society and under the brick ceiling of economic advancement without papers. This "disengagement" allows many undocumented immigrants to push their families forward into generational advancement through American education and opportunities to American born offspring. Yet, as immigration laws begin to change, it becomes more and more difficult for immigrants like Toure to achieve this "disengagement" without several encounters with INS.

Contreras (2002) writes that today immigrant students and their families are experiencing new laws, amendments, and practices among states that mirror practices of a pre-desegregation era in America (Contreras, 2002, p. 150). As educators, we are aware of the impact socio-economic status has on a student's success in school, and, for immigrant students, language and literacy barriers only compound such issues. The advancement of our children greatly depends on the parents' ability to support the educational endeavors of their children, and without the freedom to advance economically, immigrant parents are consistently pushed to find ways to access a system that does not welcome them. For children of undocumented immigrants, this issue is at the forefront of concern.

Djeli: Blood (Bambara)

Because Africans see themselves as the extension of the group, the institution of marriage and child bearing are of pivotal importance to them. Marriage and procreation are of extreme relevance to Africans. In fact they are the centrality of life for African families. . . . The significance of kinship in African culture cannot be overestimated. In fact it is the fabric that engenders and guides relationships between people in the African community (Nwadiora, 1996, p. 119).

When Toure arrived in the United States, he was seventeen years old and could have technically attended public schools. Yet, because his family operated within the West African subculture of traders and street merchants in New York City, no one even mentioned or knew about his access to public education. However, from the beginning of his pursuit of an American visa, Toure's dream had been to study in America. "In Mali, I was very good in school. I loved school, but school only goes just that far- you know, don't you?" (Personal Interview, January 30, 2005). In this interview, Toure spoke of his opinions of the Malian educational system, which he believed was a good one but did not provide him with the adequate facilities to go past secondary school or *lycée*, as many West Africans call high school. In New York, he began working for his family's business and trying to apply to schools in the U.S. for college; however, because his family had little experience with American education, he was unable to access the proper avenues to begin legitimate studies in the U.S. or obtain a high school diploma. Nevertheless, when his visa expiration date grew closer, he began to resist returning to his country. He believed he could find a way to study in the United States.

Against the wishes of his mother and his uncles, Toure refused to return to Mali, and, as a result, his family—both in his country and in the United States—abandoned him. As Nwadiora (1996) states, the family is the center of African life. For Soninke people and many other West African ethnic groups, the mother is at the center of this familial force. Often, Africans will allow elder family members, especially parents, to weigh heavily on personal decisions (Nwadiora, 1996, p.120). A Ghana proverb states "I am because we are; without we I am not, and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1969). Thus, such a decision to go against the will of a family is an extreme personal sacrifice. "I knew what was good for me, but I was so young. I wanted to go back to Mali with an education, not with nothing to show for my work here" (Personal interview, January 30, 2005). As a result of his decision, Toure moved from place to place until finally landing in a small Midwestern city a few years ago. It has now been seven years since his arrival in America and only recently have communications with his mother begun to improve. Yet, throughout these seven years, he has lived on the outskirts of American society and in the shadows of the economic and educational sector as a form of self-protection and preservation. Going back to his country through deportation or arrest would be even more of a disgrace than the refusal to go back at all (Personal Interview, January 25, 2005).

Je: Water (Bambara)

All over West Africa, the symbol of the crossroads exists in a variety of aspects of African life. In Guinea-Bissau, when an animal is killed as sacrifice or for nourishment, it is customary to draw a cross in the sand and to allow the blood of the animal to drip into that cross and fill it. The blood is said to seep into the earth and re-nourish its lifeblood. The philosophy behind this stems from the West African belief in the meaning of a crossroads. Paul Stoller (2001) recounts this as it exists in Niger and Mali with the Songhay people:

For the Songhay people of the Republics of Niger and Mali, crossroads are points of existential danger where decisions of depth and consequence are deliberated and made. Even

carefully made decisions can have ramifications that threaten a person's very existence. From a West African vantage, one should never underestimate the difficulty of negotiating a crossroads; it requires courage, daring, and imagination. Courage is necessary to resist the very real temptation to turn around and embrace the comforts of the past. Daring is required to fight off the pull of false consciousness. It is easy to take the most direct- and painless-path into the unknown. Imagination is needed to avoid the pitfalls of a new terrain (Stoller, 2001, p. 24).

As a researcher, I happened to be standing in front of Toure when he reached a crossroads. For the past seven years, as a child, and now as an adult, he has slowly learned the ways of American culture, food, and life, but he has not had fair or equal access to American amenities: what we would also call, American necessities. According to the United States government, he literally and figuratively, does not exist in this country. He is an undocumented estimate of the profound shift American education has begun to see because of immigrants like Toure. And so our work together started at the crossroads.

During the past four months, Toure has lost his job due to illness and been forced to move into the Midwestern version of an SRO, or safe-house as he calls it. A safe house is a place where a group of African immigrants share the responsibilities of household bills, food, and communication in a generalized form of reciprocity. "When you have some money, you pay, when you don't, the others will pay for you. They are not my people, but they speak my language. They are like family. It is our way" (Interview, March 30, 2005). We have worked on countless afternoons to read and analyze immigration laws and papers, consulted pro bono lawyers, and worked through lengthy conversations with his mother who is now pleading with him to return. He does not want to return. Instead, he wants to prove that he can become educated here, even if it means risking deportation (Personal Interview, April 28, 2005).

At first he was skeptical of his ability to read and analyze INS forms and procedures, but now he presents them to me for clarification. In the five months that I have known him, he has forced me, as Paulo Freire (1990) points out, to "step aside" and to learn as the process unfolds.

Toure's cultural background, from an American standpoint, can appear fatalistic. He not only believes in the crossroads, he embraces it, where Americans might choose to turn away. "I am not afraid. What will they do now? Send me home? Whatever happens to me now is supposed to happen. I will be okay and if I am not, then that is what the plan was always" (Interview, May 2, 2005). He embraces the "road" that Horton and Freire (1990) refer to in their discussions of the path to being educated as opposed to simply being taught. "The way you really learn is to start something and learn as you go along" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 40). Toure had a dream, but he looked to education to provide him with the ability to forge "the road" for his dreams.

Kunu: Tomorrow (Bambara)

Initially, Toure spent most of his class time in the ESL facility of our program. For Toure, part of becoming an American, as he puts it, has to do with the process of education in this country and the knowledge of the insider culture. With this comes the navigation of an often complicated system of social service. Managing the bureaucratic systems of social service and the process of solidifying an "identity" (through a driver's license, social security card, car title, etc.) is often frustrating for those of us who are considered "insiders" in the American system; however, managing such a system without a shared cultural foundation, language, or even the proper identification is almost unimaginable. Inevitably, many immigrants choose the same path as Toure has and seek education as a way of navigating such a system.

Ernie Stringer (2004) describes the people who are involved in any organization as “stakeholders” (Stringer, 2004, p. 28). As a result, when Toure arrived in the program, there were several stakeholders involved in the decisions that would be made with and for him. First and foremost, he was not typical of the ESL population currently enrolled in the class. Nevertheless, because his linguistic and cultural background was “typical” of an ESL student, he was automatically placed in the ESL facility. Although the entire organization houses a GED program that is open to the public, Toure was seen by other stakeholders as an ESL student; however, he was extremely vocal about his educational interests and made it a priority for the program to seek ways to place him in the GED classes with American students.

It is important to note that African students hold a deep respect for authority figures and teachers especially have a revered status in many West African countries. Inevitably, the cultural mindset that “the teacher knows best” (which is also a residual of the colonialist era), often prevails in ESL classrooms that house African students. Often, for teachers, this silence is taken to mean satisfaction, but, in reality, it may not be. Many African students will simply stop attending classes instead of voicing their opinions (Personal interview, April 8, 2005). Toure, because he is culturally familiar with American interaction, was not hesitant to voice his needs; however, he was also worried about “hurting feelings” of other stakeholders involved (teachers, program coordinators, and colleagues who would believe he was “too good for them”).

Finally, the GED program agreed to test Toure for his basic skills. Through word of mouth and the internet resources at the school, he was able to gain an understanding of ESL students in GED programs and their status as “special needs” students, so he requested an un-timed test. His test scores showed significant background in math, but a more limited ability in reading and writing, due to the fact that English is not his first language. The other stakeholders believed it would be better for him to stay in ESL until his English improved. He asked me to go with him to speak to the director. In this meeting, he asked, “If I were an American student, would you accept me into this class with the reading score I have?” Clearly, her response was “yes”. Toure is now one of two African students in the GED program. Because of his efforts, the program has become more open to allowing former ESL students into its classes.

Conclusion

So this is a story of a how a tidy project became a somewhat murky participatory research endeavor involving several students and an ESL program; Toure, of course, was one of those students. The murkiness, however, came about when the students began to participate in their education instead of passively accepting it.

As a researcher, I initially believed that my sole role in this facility was to observe and retrieve data from its participants. Yet, as the days passed, I realized that the qualitative method by which I was approaching the study had little to do with the fiber of what I was actually doing as a result of this study. My participants had chosen education as a means of taking action socially, politically, and economically in their own lives. However, our facility was not meeting their need for action for a variety of reasons. We were providing basic literacy training and ESL classes, but the work we were doing within the classes had very little to do with the every day survival of the students in the class. Because we did not know what to do with their experience, we chose instead to teach them what we knew about our experience of them through textbooks, videotapes, and computer programs.

During this project, I began to listen to the participants’ questions and, as a result, we began to restructure the ways in which they encountered education in our facility. Based on our conversations, I began to seek exterior resources for them, develop ILPs (individual learning plans) and timelines for each student, and participate in their lives through our conversations and

interactions. We became a community of learners as I searched for ways to meet their needs while simultaneously researching more about their cultures, spirituality, and individual identities within the American system. The more I learned about them, the more I began to understand, and ultimately, the more I could trust in the path they were forging in our facility. As a result, many of them, including Toure, began to find ways to mitigate a “border” identity that they had assumed in the United States.

Toure, although initially more outspoken than the other participants, became a driving force for the process by which the students began to explore their own educational needs. Yet, the process did not occur simply by having the teacher or researchers ask “What do you want to learn?” Instead, it came through waiting, observing, and listening as students were offered choices, pushed to question, and soon began demanding real world experiences that “fit” their educational goals and personal dreams. Thus, through such an experience, they began to forge a new path that was neither reliant on the border culture, nor focused on American ideas of assimilation.

In Toure’s case, we are still working through the “crossroads” of his immigrant experience with INS, but educationally, my work with his project is over. In five months, he became the master of his educational crossroads and learned to navigate a system that is often treacherous for immigrants. Yet had I not been willing to join him where he was and then move forward, as Freire (1990) writes, his course might have been much different. As educators of immigrant students, teachers must realize the importance of place in this country and in our own classrooms. Toure’s story teaches us about places where ethnicity, race, class, and educational background come to a crossroads and, ultimately, where teachers must “step aside” and allow the students to lead us to what they know and how they know, and through that allow them to become stakeholders in their own educational experience.

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