



**THE SCHOLASTIC EXPERIENCES OF IMMIGRANT  
LEARNERS AT A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN  
SYDENHAM**

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## DECLARATION

I, Aneesa Mohamed, hereby declare that this dissertation and its contents is my original work and where I have made use of other people's work, acknowledgement has been made in the text. I further declare that this work has not been submitted to any other university or institution for any other qualification.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## ABSTRACT

This research set out to explore the scholastic experiences of immigrant learners at a secondary school in Sydenham. Participants were immigrant children from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi. They were aged between thirteen and eighteen years old, and had all resided in South Africa for less than ten years. The study adopted a qualitative methodology using a narrative inquiry approach. To ensure valid data, one-on-one interviews, a focus-group discussion and observations were conducted, as well as document analysis of a diary I asked participants to keep for the duration of the data collection period. This study was based on Ogbu's (1978) cultural ecological theory of minority academic achievement and Fredrickson's (1998) broaden-and-build theory.

A few findings emerged from the study. Firstly, it was found that language played a critical role regarding academic and social acceptance at secondary school level. Learners who did not grow up being exposed to English (the language of instruction) were disadvantaged academically and often required translation from other peers who spoke their native language. Furthermore, immigrant learners were often excluded from social groups at school due to the fact that they could not speak a South African indigenous language (in this case, isiZulu). These findings supported existing literature regarding the linguistic challenges faced by immigrant students.

The second finding that emerged from the study was that a sense of belonging was a crucial factor that determined the scholastic experiences of immigrant learners. Learners who felt isolated at school (either academically or socially) displayed poor academic performance and learners who felt a sense of belonging performed at a higher level.

The concept of acculturation was the third theme examined in this study. All participants felt that they could not understand the culture of the South African students. Some of them found behaviours such as smoking, gambling, underage drinking, wearing revealing clothing and teenage sexual activity to be abhorrent, and as a result, did not want to be part of the dominant culture. Others were able to accept these aspects of South African culture without emulating them.

The two theories used hold that voluntary immigrants are generally higher achievers; however, this study showed that this is not always the case. An involuntary immigrant was able to achieve high marks, in contradiction to what Ogbu (1978) postulates. The findings were consistent with Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory because learners who possessed a high level of resilience produced far superior academic results compared with learners with low levels of resilience.

Recommendations were made for policy and practice.

### **KEY TERMS**

- Academic experiences
- Xenophobia
- Migration

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| DECLARATION .....   | ii        |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....  | iii       |
| ABSTRACT .....  | iv        |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS .....   | vi        |
| LIST OF TABLES .....  | ix        |
| <b>CHAPTER ONE: EXPLORING THE BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY .....</b> | <b>1</b>  |
| 1.1. Introduction .....   | 1         |
| 1.2 Aim/rationale .....   | 2         |
| 1.3 Focus and purpose of the study .....                        | 3         |
| 1.4 Research questions .....                                    | 4         |
| 1.5 Objectives .....  | 4         |
| 1.6 Definition of main concepts .....                           | 4         |
| 1.7 Theoretical orientation of this study .....                 | 6         |
| 1.7.1 Cultural ecological theory (Ogbu, 1978) .....             | 6         |
| 1.7.2 Broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998) .....        | 7         |
| 1.8 Methodology .....   | 8         |
| 1.8.1 Research approach .....                                   | 8         |
| 1.8.2 Research design .....                                     | 8         |
| 1.9 Conclusion and overview of the study .....                  | 9         |
| <b>CHAPTER 2: REVIEWING THE LITERATURE .....</b>                | <b>11</b> |
| 2.1 Introduction .....  | 11        |
| 2.2 Global literature .....                                     | 11        |
| 2.3 National literature .....                                   | 17        |
| 2.4 Conclusion .....  | 22        |
| <b>CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....</b>               | <b>24</b> |
| 3.1 Introduction .....  | 24        |
| 3.2 Cultural ecological theory (Ogbu, 1978) .....               | 25        |
| 3.3 Broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998) .....          | 29        |
| <b>CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY .....</b>                             | <b>33</b> |
| 4.1 Introduction .....  | 33        |
| 4.2 Paradigmatic suppositions .....                             | 33        |
| 4.3 Research approach .....                                     | 34        |
| 4.4 Research design .....                                       | 34        |
| 4.5 Contexts and sampling .....                                 | 34        |

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| 4.6 Validity, reliability and trustworthiness.....             | 35        |
| 4.7 Methods of data generation.....                            | 36        |
| 4.8 Data production.....                                       | 37        |
| 4.9 Data analysis .....  | 38        |
| 4.10 Ethical issues.....                                       | 38        |
| 4.11 Limitations of the study .....                            | 39        |
| <b>CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS.....</b>     | <b>43</b> |
| 5.1 Introduction.....  | 43        |
| 5.2 Amanda.....  | 43        |
| 5.2.1 Amanda’s life history.....                               | 43        |
| 5.2.2 Academic performance and schooling experiences .....     | 44        |
| 5.3 Noleen .....   | 47        |
| 5.3.1 Noleen’s life history.....                               | 47        |
| 5.3.2 Academic performance and schooling experiences.....      | 49        |
| 5.4 Delilah.....   | 51        |
| 5.4.1 Delilah’s life history .....                             | 51        |
| 5.4.2 Academic performance and schooling experiences.....      | 53        |
| 5.5 Victor .....   | 54        |
| 5.5.1 Victor’s life history .....                              | 54        |
| 5.5.2 Academic performance and schooling experiences.....      | 56        |
| 5.6 Martin.....  | 57        |
| 5.6.1 Martin’s life history .....                              | 57        |
| 5.6.2 Academic performance and schooling experiences.....      | 58        |
| 5.7 Belinda .....  | 60        |
| 5.7.1 Belinda’s life history.....                              | 60        |
| 5.7.2 Academic performance and schooling experiences.....      | 61        |
| 5.8 Discussion of findings.....                                | 63        |
| 5.8.1 Language as a barrier .....                              | 64        |
| 5.8.2 A sense of belonging.....                                | 65        |
| 5.8.3 Acculturation.....                                       | 67        |
| 5.8.4 Resilience.....  | 68        |
| 5.8.5 Cultural ecological theory.....                          | 68        |
| <b>CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY .....</b> | <b>71</b> |
| 6.1 Introduction.....  | 71        |
| 6.2 An overview of the journey .....                           | 72        |
| 6.2.1 Chapter One .....  | 72        |
| 6.2.2 Chapter Two.....   | 72        |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| 6.2.3 Chapter Three.....                                  | 73        |
| 6.2.4 Chapter Four .....                                  | 74        |
| 6.2.5 Chapter Five.....                                   | 74        |
| 6.3 Review of the purpose and key questions.....          | 75        |
| 6.4 Summary of emerging themes from the study.....        | 77        |
| 6.4.1 Language as a barrier .....                         | 77        |
| 6.4.2 Sense of belonging.....                             | 78        |
| 6.4.3 Acculturation.....                                  | 79        |
| 6.4.4 Theoretical orientation .....                       | 80        |
| 6.5 Methodological reflections .....                      | 81        |
| 6.6 Discussion of limitations during the study.....       | 81        |
| 6.7 Significance of the study.....                        | 82        |
| 6.8 Recommendations for further research.....             | 83        |
| 6.9 Conclusions.....                                      | 84        |
| <b>REFERENCES .....</b>                                   | <b>85</b> |
| <b>APPENDICES .....</b>                                   | <b>99</b> |
| APPENDIX ONE: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE.....                     | 100       |
| APPENDIX TWO: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS .....                 | 102       |
| APPENDIX THREE:LETTER TO THE PARENT .....                 | 103       |
| APPENDIX FOUR: INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR THE PARENT ..... | 105       |
| APPENDIX FIVE: LETTER TO THE LEARNER.....                 | 106       |
| APPENDIX SIX: INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR THE LEARNER.....  | 108       |
| APPENDIX SEVEN: GATEKEEPER PERMISSION FORM.....           | 109       |
| APPENDIX EIGHT: ETHICAL CLEARANCE.....                    | 110       |
| APPENDIX NINE: CONFIRMATION OF EDITING .....              | 111       |



## **LIST OF TABLES**

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Table 1. Summary of emerging themes and categories in relation to the literature ..... | 76 |
|--|----|

## CHAPTER ONE

### EXPLORING THE BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

#### 1.1. Introduction

Post-apartheid South Africa has developed into “the locus for people seeking jobs or fleeing regional conflicts” (Klotz, 2000, p. 834). The end of formal apartheid generated new prospects for migration into South Africa. According to Sookrajh, Gopal and Maharaj (2005), this accounts for the significant increase in the number of immigrants coming into South Africa. Many South African studies report that African immigrants relocate in order to escape the trials challenging them in their countries of origin (Minnaar, Pretorius & Wentzel, 1995; Rogerson, 1997). These immigrants often cross the borders with their families, including young children. Some of these families cross the borders purely because they have children and thus want them to grow up with better opportunities. Inevitably these immigrant children have to go to school (Sookrajh et al., 2005).

Onchwari, Onchwari and Keengwe (2008) argue that the children of immigrants have been insufficiently researched despite being an expanding population. As an educator, I have first-hand experience of immigrant learners who enter high school with conflicting values and a language deficit. Sometimes these learners manage to achieve high grades and fit in to the secondary school environment with minimal adjustment issues. However, other learners seem miserable, achieve dismal grades and are susceptible to bullying and harassment. As a result, it is essential to explore the experiences these immigrant learners have in the South African school system (Adebanji, 2010, p. 1), and it is crucial to make society conscious of the challenges these children face as they attempt to acclimatise to the secondary school environment. It is envisaged that this research will help teachers and other stakeholders in the field of education to gain an understanding of how to meet the academic needs of immigrant adolescents effectively.

## **1.2 Aim/rationale**

The youth are far more than the mere future leaders of a country; they also preserve and pass on their culture and are entrusted with keeping alive the norms and traditions associated with their particular geographic location and social territory. However, what happens when the youth are displaced into an unfamiliar country? How do they continue to sustain the values of their culture and country while facing prejudice and unfamiliarity in their day-to-day lives? How do they manage the precarious balance between acclimatising to their host country while maintaining the roots that anchor them to their homeland? This is a study that aims to answer these and other pertinent questions.

I have chosen this area of research because, as a secondary school educator, I have observed that immigrant learners encounter greater challenges at high school than South African learners. This study focuses mainly on the academic experiences of immigrant learners. In order to identify the factors that cause immigrant learners to experience academic achievement in the way that they do, it is necessary to acknowledge that one cannot study academic experiences in a vacuum. As a result of many societal factors (which this study examines), including language use, family background, ethnicity, social change and harassment, immigrants learners are more vulnerable to victimisation than other learners, and thus find it more difficult to excel academically.

South African literature (Vandeyar, 2012) indicates that traditionally, black immigrant learners have been grouped together with black South African learners purely on the basis of 'race', and that therefore there is little known about their experiences at high school. The collected data indicates that when studies are conducted, black immigrant learners and black South African learners in schools are rarely divided by nationality. Thus, black immigrant learners are not studied separately even though their academic experiences differ greatly from the academic experiences of black South African high school learners. This standardised categorisation of black learners ignores the vital indigenous, linguistic and cultural differences that exist within a learner population.

Global literature (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004) focuses on the adverse educational context for immigrants in their host countries. This context involves xenophobic attacks, dropping out of high school, social exclusion, the inability to communicate effectively and poor academic performance. This study acknowledges the many unfavourable academic experiences of immigrant learners in South Africa. However, unlike other current literature, it also discusses the positive experiences of immigrant learners, including those who manage to thrive academically in spite of the challenges they face. This is therefore a comparative study that identifies the factors that contribute to both the positive and negative academic experiences immigrant learners face, but that also examines what causes some immigrant learners to thrive academically and some learners to struggle.

The existing literature suggests that there is an imperative need for a study that focuses solely on the academic experiences (both positive and negative) of immigrant learners and that tells their stories to the world. This study narrates the academic experiences of immigrant learners in South Africa in a way that has been insufficiently covered by previous South African literature. South African studies have primarily focused on the racial undercurrents that characterise relations between South African learners (Sayed, 2000; Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001; Bush & Heystek, 2003; Naicker, 2005). There is very little exploration into the academic experiences of black immigrant students in South African schools.

This study focuses on exploring the academic experiences of black immigrant learners in South Africa, both in and out of the classroom. These learners are studied within their current sociocultural context in order to make meaning of their experiences. This study may be utilised to inform educators, and make them aware of the diversity of the learner population and the complexities associated with being an immigrant learner in a high school.

### **1.3 Focus and purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study was to explore and examine the experiences that immigrant learners have at high school and investigate what contributes to positive and negative

scholastic experiences. Previous studies have not looked at the positive experiences of immigrant learners and very few have been carried out in KwaZulu-Natal. Hence, there is a need for a comparative study of this nature. This study focuses on the academic experiences that learners have, as well as on how their sociocultural experiences influence their academic experiences. The learners were questioned about their relationships with educators, the curriculum, their relationships with South African learners and their family history. The purpose of this study was to increase our knowledge and awareness of the experiences of immigrant children within the South African school environment and how their experiences influence their academic performance.

#### **1.4 Research questions**

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the academic experiences of immigrant learners at school?
- How do immigrant learners experience academic achievement at high school?
- Why do they experience academic achievement in the way that they do?

#### **1.5 Objectives**

The objectives of this study were as follows:

- To understand the academic experiences of immigrant learners at high school.
- To comprehend how immigrant learners experience academic achievement at high school.
- To identify the factors that cause immigrant learners to experience academic achievement in the way that they do.

#### **1.6 Definition of main concepts**

In order to understand this study, a few key concepts have been identified as important. Firstly, a definition of “academic experiences” is provided. Secondly, other important concepts are defined: “migration”, “immigrant” and “xenophobia”.

The term ‘academic experiences’ encompasses learners’ academic strengths and learning difficulties (Assouline, 2003). It explores learners’ experiences of learning and achieving, instructional approaches and the implemented curriculum. This study aims to understand how all these factors contribute toward learners either achieving excellent grades or dismal marks.

The definition of ‘scholastic experiences’ is the most important one. For this study, ‘scholastic experiences’ means how immigrant learners learn — their classroom experiences and their perceived abilities while learning, as well as their response to the South African curriculum. ‘Academic experiences’ can be used in place of scholastic experiences. The term ‘academic achievement’ in this study refers to whether learners are able to achieve good academic results, i.e. passing their subjects and therefore illustrating knowledge and comprehension.

The term ‘Black’ commonly refers to a person with African ancestral origins. In some circumstances, usually in politics or power struggles, the term Black signifies all non-White minority populations (Nusche, 2009). In this study, the term Black African refers to learners, parents and all people with African ancestral origins who, usually, migrated from sub-Saharan Africa (Hermans, 2004).

Suárez-Orozco defines migration as the “more or less permanent movement of people across space” (2001, p. 180). Suárez-Orozco (2001, p. 181) goes on to say, “People ‘emigrate’ out of one location and become ‘immigrants’ in the new setting”. In this study it is critical to incorporate the context into this definition. Post-apartheid South Africa epitomises liberty and success, a haven from destitution and a land of economic opportunities for many living in other African countries (Krüger & Osman, 2010, p. 53). Migration to South Africa has been unavoidable due to long-standing patterns of labour migration in the mining and agriculture sectors both pre and post 1994. Prior to 1994, male migrant labourers were not permitted to bring their spouses and children into South Africa. However, over the past two decades, there has been a substantial increase in migration from Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries, with many male immigrants being accompanied by their family units (Posel, 2004).

This shift in the migration climate has led to an increase in the number of immigrants. An immigrant is a person who was born as a citizen of one country and subsequently moved to another country at some point in his or her lifetime (Wadhwa, Rissing, Saxenian & Gereffi, 2007, p. 9). For the purposes of this study the immigrant learners, i.e. foreign-born minors, have lived in South Africa for less than ten years.

As a consequence of this increase in the number of immigrants, experiencing xenophobia has become a significant part of life in South Africa for many non-South Africans. Boehnke, Hagan and Hefler (1998, p. 586) propose that xenophobia is a form of racism that does not use the notion of race as its essential component yet, like racism, still results in prejudice, stereotyping, bias and discrimination. Although the term 'xenophobia' may conjure up images of violent attacks against foreigners, the majority of immigrants in South Africa have been experiencing more subtle and insidious forms of xenophobia on a daily basis for as long as they have been in the country. These forms include not only physical violence, but also verbal and psychological abuse, structural and institutional violence, and cultural and ethnic discrimination. Many studies have looked at xenophobia and its effects in South Africa (Dodson, 2010; Neocosmos, 2010; Kirshner, 2011).

These are the fundamental concepts that define the experiences of immigrants in South Africa. By using them as a framework for understanding, it will lead to a greater awareness of the academic experiences of immigrant learners.

## **1.7 Theoretical orientation of this study**

Two theories were identified as appropriate for this study: Ogbu's (1978) cultural ecological theory and Fredrickson's (1998) broaden-and-build theory.

### **1.7.1 Cultural ecological theory (Ogbu, 1978)**

Ogbu's resistance theory revolves around the experiences and perceptions of immigrant learners. Ogbu describes how several environmental factors, including social and cultural factors, influence the educational experiences of immigrant youth.

Cultural ecological theory suggests that immigrants fall into one of two categories: voluntary minorities or involuntary minorities. Voluntary minorities are those who came or whose ancestors came to their host country of their own free will. Involuntary minorities are those whose ancestors were brought to their host country by force or whose ancestors were forced into ethnic minority status by military force. In the educational context, Ogbu's 1990 findings suggest that voluntary minorities tend to have more positive attitudes toward schooling, teachers and the curriculum, whereas involuntary minorities tend to avoid responsibility for their educational advancement and blame teachers and school administrators for the problems they face. I planned to see if Ogbu's theory holds true for immigrant learners in South Africa by ascertaining which learners are voluntary immigrants.

This theory uses what Ogbu (1987) terms a “dual frame of reference”, i.e. a cognitive perspective that allows immigrant learners to view the barriers that they face through the lens of the experiences in their home countries. Using this theoretical framework enables me to probe the learners' current experiences by asking them how these experiences would compare to learning at a school in their home country. This is a strategy to enable reticent learners to open up about their home country and to allow the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the kind of background that learners come from.

### **1.7.2 Broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998)**

While Ogbu's resistance theory focuses on the negative effects of being an immigrant learner, a resilience theory is needed to explain immigrant learners who achieve academic success. For this purpose, the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001) is used as a framework for understanding psychological resilience. Psychological resilience refers to effective coping and adjustment by people who are faced with loss, hardship or difficulty. The broaden-and-build theory posits that positive and negative emotions have different purposes, and different cognitive and physiological outcomes. This theory suggests that negative thoughts narrow one's momentary thought-action repertoire by preparing one to behave in a specific way (e.g. attack when angry, escape when afraid). In



contrast, various positive emotions (e.g. joy, pleasure, interest) broaden one's thought–action repertoire, expanding the range of cognitions and behaviours that come to mind. These broadened mindsets, in turn, build an individual's physical, intellectual and social resources.

Gradually, this broadened mindset might become a norm. Thus, the effect of experiencing a positive emotion is an increase in one's personal resources. Importantly, the cache of personal resources produced by positive emotions can be drawn on in times of need and used to plan for future outcomes, which may be valuable in facilitating healthy behavioural practices (Fredrickson, 2000). One can infer from this theory that those immigrant learners who prevail in spite of difficult circumstances have, over time, broadened their mindsets. Their thought processes were examined during data collection to test Fredrickson's theory and see if the way in which learners think contributes significantly to whether their academic experiences are positive or negative.

## **1.8 Methodology**

This study used a qualitative case study approach and narrative inquiry.

### **1.8.1 Research approach**

This investigation aimed to achieve a comprehensive knowledge of the participants' experiences, and a qualitative approach was therefore selected. The qualitative researcher seeks to discover the meanings that participants attach to their behaviour, how they interpret situations, and what their perspectives are on particular issues (Woods, 1993). Qualitative research is interested in why particular people (or groups) feel in particular ways, the processes by which these attitudes are constructed and the role they play in dynamic processes within the organisation or group (Palys, 2008). I was interested in examining the way in which my participants perceived their role within the school context, which is why I selected a qualitative approach.

### **1.8.2 Research design**

A narrative research design was chosen. Narrative inquiry is the interdisciplinary study of the activities involved in generating and analysing stories of life experiences (e.g. life histories, narrative interviews, journals, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies and biographies) and then reporting that research (Schwandt, 2007 p. 204). By discovering and analysing the stories of my participants, I attempted to interpret meanings from their scholastic experiences. Narrative inquiry always begins in the midst of ongoing experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). In this process, learners continue to live their stories, even as they narrate their experiences. Since this study aimed to tell the stories of immigrant learners, the narrative inquiry approach was suitable and was considered the most effective.

### **1.9 Conclusion and overview of the study**

Chapter One provides the background, context and focus of the study, as well as a brief overview of what to expect in the following chapters.

Chapter Two comprises a review of the available literature from national and international perspectives. This chapter highlights the various reasons why African people move to South Africa and the problems they face in adjusting to a new society. Particular attention was paid to the effects that immigration has on the school experiences of children around the world.

Chapter Three focuses on explanations of the theoretical orientations utilised in this study. The theoretical frameworks used in this study are cultural ecological theory (Ogbu, 1978) and the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998). These theories were selected because of the comparative nature of this study; one theory provides an explanation for negative scholastic experiences and the other provides an explanation for positive experiences.

Chapter Four outlines the research methodology, paradigmatic position, data collection methods and sample selection used in this study. Narrative inquiry was chosen as the most effective strategy for the research because of the focus on experiences. I made use of convenience sampling because of my position as an

educator at the research site. The participants were three girls and three boys between the ages of 13 and 18. They had all lived in South Africa for less than ten years and were born in their home countries. All the participants were black immigrants from other African countries. Data was gathered via semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion. The ethical considerations involved in this research methodology are discussed comprehensively in this chapter.

Chapter Five presents the data collected as well as the key themes that emerged from the narratives. The narratives of each participant are presented under two headings: life history and schooling experiences. A brief biographical background is presented before cumulative accounts of their scholastic experiences are explored. The data was analysed based on distinctive themes that developed from the participants' accounts. Findings were discussed in relation to the theoretical perspectives as well as in relation to the existing literature.

Chapter Six summarises the findings in relation to the research questions. The significance of the study is presented and I reflect on the research journey. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

What follows in the next chapter is a review of the related literature.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

#### 2.1 Introduction

Overcoming the problem of undereducated high school students in general, and minorities in particular, continues to hold a prominent place in educational research and related fields. Much of the literature, both recent and older (Fass, 2005; Hemson, 2011), concludes that immigrant learners experience academic adjustment problems when they enrol in schools in their host society. Academic experiences of immigrant students have to be investigated in terms of broader societal and interpersonal impacts. In the case of South Africa, this phenomenon has to be understood against the backdrop of the broader context of migration and xenophobia in South Africa. This literature review aims to identify and engage with those studies, thus answering questions about what factors affect academic achievement and how it is possible that some immigrant learners achieve high academic results in spite of negative factors.

#### 2.2 Global literature

Migration is one of the most drastic life changes an individual or family can endure. For immigrant children, the migration experience profoundly restructures their lives, as accustomed patterns and ways of relating to other people noticeably alter. Some potential stressors related to migration include the loss of close relationships, housing problems, a sense of isolation, obtaining legal documentation, going through the acculturation process, learning a new language, negotiating their ethnic identity, changing family roles, and adjusting to the schooling experience (Igoa, 1995; Zhou, 1997a; Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Garza, Reyes, & Trueba, 2004). Despite the practice of immigration being a centuries-old one, immigrant children still tend to show relatively poor levels of education and training when their academic performance is measured (Ricucci, 2008). Globally, for immigrant learners the main picture is one of structural disadvantage in education as well as in vocational and professional qualifications. Unfortunately, the overall performance of these

children generally lags in all school success indicators: higher percentages of them drop out, they repeat classes more frequently, and are concentrated in the least challenging educational institutions (Crul & Vermeulen, 2003). Based on a review of studies of immigrant learners across 13 countries (Australia, Canada, England, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Norway, Poland, Scotland, Spain, Switzerland, and the USA), Lamb and Markussen (2011, p. 5) postulate that several socio-demographic variables such as language, ethnicity and family background have been shown to contribute to immigrants' withdrawal from school at the "upper secondary level". These immigrant learners retreat from school and are more likely to engage in behaviours which inhibit high academic achievement, such as truancy and absenteeism (Lamb & Markussen, 2011).

As Lamb and Markussen (2011) have stated, language difficulties serve as a primary disadvantage for immigrant learners that inhibits classroom participation and academic success. This may occur because learners whose first language is not the language of instruction in their school are sometimes seen as a problem. Their language education is often viewed as the responsibility of specialist staff rather than as an integral part of the remit of all teachers (Karsten, 2006; Nusche, 2009). Under such circumstances, the provision of specialist language staff may disadvantage rather than help children (Nusche, 2009). In these scenarios, whether explicitly stated or not, the primary concern is maintenance of the standards of education for the advantaged. The choices made reflect teacher and parent preferences, where some children are perceived as different to a norm and are viewed as deficient, rather than potentially advantaged by being bilingual.

Breen (2001) proposes that when non-native learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but they are constantly organising and reorganising a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. Breen (2001) took the position that when learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will increase their value in the social world. Learners will expect or hope to have a good return on their investment in the target language — a return that will give them access to the privileges of target language speakers. Thus

an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space. When immigrant learners are not successful at communicating in the target language and are laughed at or teased, they withdraw from the situation, and this filters into the classroom where they are forced to learn in the native language. This was witnessed when Giltrow and Edward described how most of their Guatemalan immigrant learners had "retired from the classroom, either by physically removing themselves and no longer attending regularly, or by adopting an aloof, unengaged way of attending" (1992, p. 63).

Regarding ethnicity, there is a growing consensus that immigrant children securely anchored in their ethnic cultures perform better academically (Deyhle, 1995; Gibson, 1997; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). When immigrant learners are able to receive support from strong ethnic communities that value academic achievement, they tend to do well in school (Gibson, 1997; Zhou, 1997b). Such networks of social support are termed "social capital", often defined as the benefits that accrue to individual members of a group by virtue of their group membership (Gibson, 1997). Studies of social capital suggest that it affects academic achievement and attainment, educational aspirations and school engagement. Research on immigrant learners indicates that their academic achievement is correlated with the strength of their ethnic self-identification (Gibson, 1997). Those who are embedded in their ethnic cultures tend to do better in school compared with those who abandon their ethnic culture and language under the pressures of teachers and non-immigrant peers in school (Gibson, 1997). In her study of Mexican students, Gibson (1998) found that teachers' negative attitudes about the use of Spanish at school affected how Mexican students felt about the school. Matute-Bianchi (1986), in her study of Mexican-American and Japanese-American students, indicated that scholastic success was related to a strong Mexican identity. Based on their case study on Vietnamese immigrant students, Bankston and Zhou (1995) concluded that proficiency in one's home language is positively associated with academic achievement.

Research findings indicate that students who have a sense of belonging to the school community are more engaged in learning (Osterman, 2000). While various labels that

denote the concept of belonging exist in the literature — such as ‘attachment’, ‘sense of membership’, ‘belongingness’, ‘sense of community’ and ‘acceptance’ — they refer, in general, to students’ psychological experiences (Osterman, 2000), and more specifically, to students’ perceptions of a school and/or classroom environment as supportive, caring and accepting. In her extensive review of literature on students’ need for belonging in the school community, Osterman (2000) concluded that when children experience a sense of belonging, they are more likely to

demonstrate intrinsic motivation, to accept the authority of others while at the same time establishing a stronger sense of identity, experiencing their own sense of autonomy, and accepting responsibility to regulate their own behavior in the classroom consistent with classroom norms. (p. 331)

Notably, a sense of belonging to school and engagement in school are linked: a sense of belonging to school leads to positive attitudes towards school members and increases student engagement, while feelings of alienation are associated with behavioural problems in the classroom, disengagement, lower achievement and dropout (Osterman, 2000).

As discussed, many studies have shown that economic and educational progress among different immigrant groups is uneven and unequal (Schoeni, McCarthy & Vernez 1996; Vernez et al., 1996). Despite the vast differences in academic achievement among immigrant children, Hao and Bonstead-Bruns (1998) argue that immigrant parents have higher educational expectations for their children than do native parents and that these expectations translate into children's greater educational achievement. According to the social capital framework as used by Hao and Bonstead-Bruns (1998), parents can foster positive relationships with their children that reinforce school learning at home and provide opportunities, encouragement, and emotional support for children's ongoing education. When such a relationship is present, parents' and children's expectations are more likely to increase and agree with each other, enhancing the children's academic achievement.

Kurtines and Miranda (1980) suggest that differences in immigrant children’s expectations of themselves and family role expectations can often lead to family

tensions and conflicts. Discrepancies in the values and practices of these children and their parents may create pressure in selecting which set of cultural norms and expectations to adhere to — those of their native culture or those of the mainstream culture they now find themselves in. The relevance of family and the significance given to education as a mechanism of incorporation into the host society is obvious (Leonini, 2005). However, if the family is unsupportive of efforts related to the learner's education, sometimes their education becomes a heavy burden in terms of school-related choices and withdrawal from school. Personal inclinations are replaced by the parents' economic needs and worries, as they prefer to steer their children towards professional careers that ensure quick access to the work market. Within the Italian context, Ricucci (2008) found that foreign adolescents mainly attend vocational institutes because these are considered to be less demanding and more useful for job placement (certain work for foreigners) and also because other fellow nationals attend these institutes; thus, immigrant learners at the secondary school level are steered toward these kinds of careers by their parents.

Perriera, Harris and Lee (2006) focus on the experiences of African, Hispanic and Asian immigrant learners in urban high schools. Their study found that immigrant learners with low levels of parental involvement, few or no positive role models, and community isolation are prone to poor academic performance in school. For Hispanics, under-education was demonstrated by a continuing differential in the achievement levels of white students and students of Hispanic descent. Early research suggested that the underachievement of groups with a Spanish language background was due to their inability to comprehend lessons in English and to their low socioeconomic status (Brown, Rosen, & Hill, 1980). Other American studies have focused on the high prevalence of discrimination toward immigrant learners in high schools. Rosenbloom and Way (2004) used interviews and participant observation to describe how ethnic minority learners negatively experience school. Asian students reported physical and verbal harassment by American classmates, while African and Latino students reported discrimination by teachers and school management that inhibited their academic achievement.

Oliveres's (2006) qualitative research with Latino high school learners found that



although families appear to support students' aspirations to attain good academic results, the home environments are not always conducive to academic success. The crowded nature of their families' small rented apartments meant that these students, in addition to caring for younger siblings, often did their homework away from home, secluded themselves in a corner, or waited until everyone was asleep to get their work done. None of the students described having a separate room in their homes where they could find quietness and an adequate space to study. In all, 60% lived in crowded homes with six or more people, and 90% lived in single or studio flats where everyone slept in the same room.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) maintained that schools shape learners' development daily, and positive or negative school experiences ultimately structure adolescents' decisions to commit to their education and achieve. School connectedness, at a broad level, refers to students' feelings of school acceptance and support, and promotes positive outcomes, including lower dropout rates, lower rates of depression and drug use, and higher self-esteem, self-efficacy, and well-being (Roeser et al., 2000; Way & Robinson, 2003). Supportive and respectful student-teacher relationships can contribute to students' sense of connectedness to school, promoting high grades and motivation, and limiting behavioural problems and attrition (Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Klem & Connell, 2004), suggesting that students who believe that teachers value and care about them feel more invested and academically engaged (Marchant et al., 2001).

Adolescents from immigrant and refugee families often face language barriers and cultural stress that can impede their school connection (Xiong et al., 2005), and these experiences may be magnified in emerging immigrant communities. For instance, immigrant youth may sense a cultural distance from school due to their family's background, socioeconomic standing, or parental restrictions on behaviours that may be perceived as overly controlling. Taken a step further, perceptions of discrimination stemming from teachers and students could also hinder academic success. All of these factors likely lead to low perceptions of school connection and, in turn, failure and high dropout rates (Yang, 2003).

Despite the overwhelming amount of literature on poor academic achievement encountered by immigrant learners, resilience can and has been demonstrated in England. According to Sullivan and Unwin (2011, p. 126), immigrants with Indian backgrounds had the highest rates of academic attainment at the age of 18 years, followed by whites, with black, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi attainment being lower. To put this in context, Indians in England are relatively well educated and disproportionately found among the professional classes compared to the white majority, while all other minority ethnic groups are relatively economically disadvantaged.

Whereas Asian immigrants progress well in America, the vast majority of Hispanic immigrants (21% in 1990), particularly Mexicans, fare poorly. Research has also shown that educational achievement predicts continuation in school and future educational attainment (Dugan, 1976), which, in turn, predicts future economic success (Sewell & Hauser, 1975). Despite the challenges they face, immigrant learners' adaptation is often positive, and sometimes better than that of their non-immigrant peers (Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006; Garcia-Coll & Marks, 2011). Thus, it is timely and crucial to uncover factors that contribute to the gaps in children's educational achievement and to design policies to improve achievement for all children, immigrant and native.

### **2.3 National literature**

The South African Schools Act (Department of Education, 1996) legalised the unification of the South African schooling system and guaranteed admittance of all children into the schooling system, irrespective of race, colour or faith. This act sought to equalise the inequalities of the apartheid system. However, an unexpected result of this act is that it also incidentally served the needs of a large number of black immigrant students who requested admission into the South African public schooling system. Despite the many policies legitimising the desegregation of learners after apartheid, there is, however, no clear policy for the incorporation of immigrant learners into the South African school context (Tati, 2008). The absence of such a policy leaves the social space open for name calling and labelling of immigrants i.e.

refugees, asylum seekers, etc. (Tati, 2008). After apartheid, the integrated space within the South African schooling framework suddenly took on a new dimension as the dispute over the ownership of space was no longer an issue between black and white South Africans, but became one of national territoriality (Vandeyar, 2012).

There is very little research on the experiences of immigrant learners in South African schools, especially at the secondary school level. A detailed exploration into black immigrant students' experiences and the influence of distinctive cultural contexts at school level in South Africa is required to address important issues related to immigrant education. South African studies have primarily focused on the racial undercurrents that characterise relations between South African learners (Sayed, 2000; Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001; Bush & Heystek, 2003; Naicker, 2005). There has been very little exploration into the academic experiences of black immigrant students in South African schools. Given that adolescents' academic experiences can determine long-term success (Eccles et al., 1993), and that educational achievement is a primary route by which immigrant youth can effectively adapt and promote their family's socioeconomic mobility (Zhou & Bankston, 1998), it is particularly crucial to examine the nature of adolescents' educational success in South Africa.

Vandeyar (2012), one of the few researchers in the area of South African immigrant learners, has conducted numerous studies in the field. She found that, like learners across the world, immigrant learners in South Africa also have to contend with discrimination and harassment. These findings are similar to the international findings where immigrant learners abroad are facing persecution and aggression; however, here, in South Africa the issue is between racially similar students, and not racially different ones. Vandeyar also points out that since the introduction of democracy, most public schools in South Africa, in addition to opening their doors to all South African children irrespective of race, colour or creed, have also opened their doors to a number of [black] immigrant children. There is, however, very little research on the ways in which immigrant students' experiences are framed, challenged, asserted and negotiated within the dominant institutional cultures of schools. As the number of immigrants in South Africa continues to grow, their children have begun to experience South African schools in an assortment of thought-provoking ways. As a

result of this, researchers have increased their focus on how black immigrant youth fare once in South African schools.

As discussed earlier, one of the main challenges in immigrant education has been the language barrier (Sinkkonen & Kytälä, 2014). Even though immigrant children may, within a year or two, adopt satisfactory informal skills in their new language, it takes approximately four to seven years to attain crucial language skills for academic learning (Hakuta, Butler & Witt, 2000). Therefore, one of the biggest academic challenges faced by immigrant learners in South Africa is the issue of language, particularly because curriculum and instructional approaches do not address their cultural or linguistic background. As a result of this, immigrant learners feel a sense of alienation from school rather than one of belonging. This leads to exclusion at school and the possibility of high academic achievement becomes unattainable. Taylor and Doherty (2005) argue that immigrants who are new to their host country, especially those who cannot interact with native students because of a language barrier, are also prone to experiencing problems when participating in sporting and recreational activities. When black immigrant students enter schools they do not look any different to black South African students, but they sound different because of their accent. Their accent may be viewed as a major element that disconnects them from the black Africans who are native (Fischer, 2003; Aikhionbare, 2007). Language and accent are critical factors for belonging and acceptance (Matsinhe, 2011). When one is suspected of being an outsider, the gatekeepers of South African schools (in this context, black native learners) initiate and communicate in a South African language. Language then becomes a tool of segregation and clearly delivers an idea of non-belonging to the immigrant youth in South African schools (Vandeyar, 2012).

Hemson (2011) suggests that it is important to understand adults' attitudes towards immigrants in South Africa. He proposes that such attitudes filter into the mind-sets of children and are carried with them to school from a young age. The stereotypes expressed against African foreigners in South Africa include such comments as "they have come here to take the locals' women", or "they are here to take our jobs", "they are drug dealers", "they are involved in crime", and so on (Newham et al., 2006). A recurrent stance is that they are a threat, that they are a drain on the economy and that

they are given superior treatment by government officials (Landau, 2006). Social identity is entwined with an individual's outlook on their self and their insights into how others perceive them (Ukasoanya, 2014). New immigrant learners' interpretation of others' assessment of them has the ability to influence their sense of self and, subsequently, their social adjustment. Meddin (1982) argues that if the opinions are adverse, the individual often comes to hold a negative self-concept and takes on behavioural traits that conform to this self-concept. Therefore, if learners internalise negative opinions from their peers about immigrants, it could potentially hinder their identity at school and, in turn, their academic performance. Many South Africans object to having the children of immigrants from other African countries attend school with their children (Afrobarometer in Dodson, 2010). In a certain sense, xenophobia is a form of racism that does not use the concept of race as a defining element (Boehnke, Hagan & Hefler, 1998), as both result in prejudice, stereotyping, bias and discrimination (Voster, 2002). Here xenophobia often manifests itself as Afrophobia: negative stereotyping of people from other parts of the African continent (Motha & Ramadiro, 2005; Azindow, 2007) on the grounds of South African superiority, a perception held by South Africans that South Africa is superior to the rest of the African continent (Dodson, 2010, p. 11; Neocosmos, 2010).

Continuing on the topic of xenophobia, learners "lament taunts by teachers in the classroom and by learners in the playground" (Motha & Ramadiro, 2005, p. 19). Timngum (in Livesey, 2006, pp. 50–51) notes that some immigrant learners experience physical violence. In interviews conducted with Congolese refugee youths in Johannesburg, the youths related that they felt ostracised by South Africans because they were *makwerekwere*, a derogatory term used by black South Africans to refer to foreigners (Hlobo, 2004). The term *ikwerekwere* (singular of *makwerekwere*) represents not only a black immigrant who lacks proficiency in the local South African languages, but also one who originates from a country presumed to be economically and culturally regressive in relation to South Africa (Azindow, 2007). This is an appropriate example of the perception of South African superiority discussed earlier. Even more disturbing is the alleged practice among educators of allowing learners to torment and be uncouth to immigrants without interfering (Rulashe in Livesey, 2006). The use of offensive names is also occasionally

supplemented by acts of violence committed against immigrant learners (Timngum, 2001).

Hemson (2011) conducted a study at a primary school in Durban that focused on the experiences of African immigrant learners. He found that immigrant parents seldom interacted directly with the school he was conducting the study at. Even when the principal encouraged one parent to stand for election to the school governing body, she was unsuccessful. She stated that ‘they don’t feel they have the right to be involved’, attributing this to the feeling that they don’t know enough about how things work, and also, that they work very long hours. The principal also stated that the academic standard of the school has risen with the immigrant children, and ascribes this to their willpower and hard work in spite of the many hardships they face. Some academic and sports scholarships are offered to successful students by more exalted high schools and the great majority of these are won by immigrant learners.

The results of Hemson’s study showed that immigrant learners generally outperform local children at the primary school level. Far from being inhibited by unfortunate experiences and foreigner status, the young immigrant learners drew on them to achieve academically as well as to develop a perspective and thoughtfulness. Participants in his study claimed: “You get to know two different things, instead of just living in one place, seeing the same thing all the time”, and “You learn more about the country you are going to or are in” (Hemson, 2011, p. 79).

This can be linked to resilience (discussed further in Chapter Three), which is developed at a young age. These learners see their immigrant status as a positive resource, one that they can draw upon during times of calamity, rather than as a burden or hindrance. Fass (2005, p. 945) writes that “the experience of migration through its very dislocations and the contrasts it encourages, one might argue, has its privileges”. It is clear that despite the stereotypes of dependent foreigners who do nothing for themselves, the immigrant learners display an obligation to learning, as well as a positive sense of the school environment.

According to this literature review, it could be predicted that first-generation immigrant children who do not know the major local language and who experience acute xenophobia are likely to underperform, as will the next generation. However, there is no one pattern that applies, and it is important to bear in mind that “children’s integration and performance will vary according to where they move from, where they move to, why they move, and how old they are” (Fass 2005, p. 944).

## **2.4 Conclusion**

It is clear that the academic achievement of immigrant students is the result of many variables occurring at multiple levels of our society: the community, educational system, family and pupils’ individual variables all play an important role (Heward & Cavanaugh, 2001; Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Schools provide the means for new immigrants to acquire the essential skills and competencies needed for adjustment into a new society, but they may simultaneously impose worldviews that do not conform to those of the students’ families (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2002, 2004). Different cultural factors, in addition to linguistic disadvantages, may disturb the students’ learning and academic adjustment to the South African school system, as demonstrated by Sinkkonen and Kyttälä in Finnish schools (2014).

From the individual’s point of view, adjusting to a new culture and a new school system is one of the main challenges of education, and as such, multiculturalism in schools generates challenges for individual immigrants, their families, schools and the entire school system. This kind of cultural and linguistic diversity also creates challenges for teachers and teacher education, making it necessary for teachers to have sufficient knowledge of how to encounter and work with diversity. As Gay (2000) argues, to be effective and fair, teaching and assessment in a multicultural context should, as much as possible, be based on students’ ethnic identities, cultural orientations and background experiences (Gay, 2000; Richards, Brown & Forde, 2007). Hence, teachers should also be able to adjust to these different aspects of culture and use them as a basis for their work. Within the multicultural school setting, educators face challenges in understanding and addressing newcomer families’ needs (Bailey, 2005). For instance, school counselling services for adolescents in new

immigrant communities tend to logically centre on language issues, yet elude more general cultural struggles that also influence adjustment (Smith-Adcock et al., 2006; Dotson-Blake, Foster & Gressard, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to study the high school experiences of immigrant learners and describe how relevant factors influence academic outcomes. I studied both high achievers as well as poor performers with a distinct interest in investigating why some immigrant learners outperform their native and other immigrant counterparts. I was particularly interested in how family and school factors operate over time to shape the high school outcomes of successful students. It is evident that there is a lack of extensive national literature on the topic of immigrant learners, particularly at the secondary school level. This study aims to contribute toward the existing body of literature and encourage further studies of a similar nature.

The next chapter discusses the two theories used to frame this study, as well as how the chosen theoretical framework moulds the study and findings.



## CHAPTER THREE

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by defining the term ‘theoretical framework’ and stating the reasons for having a framework in research. The significance of theory in qualitative research is explained.

A theoretical framework is a “practical theory or process that exists at diverse levels and relates to the intellectual capacity of events” (Anafara & Mertz, 2006, p. 27). Tavallaei and Abutalib (2010) argue that in research a theoretical framework gives the researcher a chance to examine and distinguish relevant portions of the events being investigated, despite certain aspects of the events being hidden. In qualitative studies, the theoretical framework is defined at the beginning of the study and offers a lens that shapes what is looked at and the questions that are asked. The use of theories provides a sense of perspective in qualitative research, which delivers an overall accommodating lens for the study of questions of gender, class, and race (or other issues of marginalised groups). This lens becomes a scaffold that structures the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analysed, and provides a solution or change (Creswell & Garrett, 2008).

Two theories have been identified as appropriate for this study: cultural ecological theory (Ogbu, 1978) and the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998). I will examine whether the three types of immigrants as defined by cultural ecological theory can be applied to a South African context, i.e. if the characteristics as exhibited by each type of immigrant as discussed by Ogbu (1978), are true of immigrant learners in South Africa.

### **3.2 Cultural ecological theory (Ogbu, 1978)**

Ogbu's cultural ecological theory (1978, 1987, 1992, 2003) is the oldest and probably the most commonly mentioned theory that correlates cultural identity factors with minority student achievement. Utilising data from studies in six countries looking at successful and unsuccessful minority groups, Ogbu (1985, 1987; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) established a minority status theory with consequences for school functioning. He divided minority groups into three clusters: autonomous, voluntary and involuntary minorities. For Ogbu, minority status is determined not merely by a group's proportion of a population, but by the position of power that the group holds in the society. Therefore, a group may be a majority in terms of actual numbers, but be a minority because they are in a subservient position in the power structure of their society (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Ogbu and Simons (1998) emphasised that minority status is determined by group history and treatment, and the frame of reference that the group uses to interact with the society at large. It is this difference in the conditions under which the group arrived in a country, and the treatment of and response to them, that leads to dissimilar patterns of educational and occupational fulfilment.

Ogbu (1987) explains that autonomous immigrant minorities are only differentiated from the dominant group in society by language, religion, or another cultural variable, and have a distinctive group identity. Autonomous minorities experience discrimination, but are not oppressed in the way that other minority groups are. Furthermore, the cultural frame of reference of autonomous minorities is encouraging of success, and students from these minority groups are not distinguished by excessively poor performance in school (Ogbu, 1985).

Voluntary immigrant minorities comprise of groups who have emigrated "more or less voluntarily to their host or new society for economic, social, or political reasons" (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1985, p. 87). The characteristics common to voluntary immigrant minorities include (a) choosing to move to the host country, (b) using their homeland as a point of reference (dual frame of reference), (c) ignoring their exploitation by the dominant group, (d) capitalising on the benefits available in the

new country (e.g. increased opportunities for education), and (e) believing that they have the option of returning to their homeland if they so choose (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1985; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Ogbu states:

The immigrants appear to rationalize and to acquiesce to the prejudice and discrimination against them by saying, for example, that they are strangers in a foreign land and have no choice but to tolerate prejudice and discrimination as a price worth paying in order to achieve the goals of their emigration. (1991, p. 13).

These characteristics allow them to take advantage of the educational system while maintaining their culture of origin. Thus, their “participation in the culture of the dominant group is selective” (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1985, p. 89), since they never yield their original cultural frame of reference, and they tend to be successful in the school system in their host countries.

Involuntary immigrant minorities are those whose ancestors were brought to their host country by force or whose families were forced into ethnic minority status by military force. They usually resent the loss of their former freedom, and they perceive the social, political, and economic barriers against them as part of their undeserved oppression (Ogbu, 1991). This perception of unwarranted oppression leads involuntary immigrant minorities to differ from the autonomous and voluntary immigrant minorities in their perceptions of chances for success in mainstream society. They understand the economic, social, and political barriers against them differently from voluntary immigrant minorities. The biggest difference is that they do not see their situation as short-term. Rather, they construe the discrimination against them as long-lasting and fixed, which leads them to develop an oppositional identity (Ogbu, 1991). In 1981, Green and Walet studied Native Americans who had developed an oppositional identity. The Native Americans believed that regardless of their capabilities, schooling, or culture, and whether or not they dressed and acted like white men, they would not be treated as equals (Green & Walet, 1981). Furthermore, involuntary immigrant minorities have no place to go to seek relief from a society that treats them like second-class citizens; they are strangers in their own homeland (Ogbu, 1987). Finally, involuntary immigrant minorities distrust members of the

dominant group and the societal institutions controlled by the dominant group.

Cultural ecological theory (CET) contemplates the extensive societal factors, school factors and “the collaboration of forces within the immigrant populations” (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 158). In this current study, societal influences relate to the impact of the immediate community of the immigrants (for example, how people living in their immediate environment feel about them). School factors involve the influence of their friends, educators and the school environment. The dynamics behind societal factors and school factors collaborate to affect the overall behaviour and mindset of immigrant students in their academic endeavours.

When deconstructing the theory, I first begin with the term, “cultural ecological theory”. The term “ecology” is generally considered to be the setting, or world of people (immigrants) in a participants’ immediate environment. The term “cultural” generally deals with how these people (immigrants) view their living conditions and behave in them, i.e. their perceptions and behaviour (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 158). Ogbu presupposes that all of these influences are interrelated, and affect the responses of immigrant students to academic achievement.

CET states that there are challenging non-school community forces that heavily affect school success (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 83). These forces are comprised of two chief components: system forces and community forces. System forces describe how immigrant students are perceived, handled or manhandled by policies pertaining to education, teaching and learning, and how they are reimbursed for their pledge to educational issues in terms of their certification (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 158). Community forces deal with how the immigrant students perceive and behave in response to their schooling because of the way they are regarded, accepted or not accepted into their environment (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Additionally, the way immigrants react to how they are treated by those in their host environment also depends on the reasons why they left their home country and how this happened. Ogbu’s CET is not readily used by other researchers in the field (Foster, 2004; Hamann, 2004; Hermans, 2004; Gilbert, 2009), because Ogbu’s work does not always consider system forces with the same importance that is offered community forces.

Ogbu maintains that academic achievement at school is not based on reasons related to heredity. Secondly, he asserts that there is no culture stemming from involuntary immigrant students that inclines them to perform well at school, and thirdly, that there is no immigrant language suited for immigrant students' superiority in learning (Ogbu, 1990). Furthermore, CET promotes the idea that only voluntary immigrants have a positive dual frame of reference, while involuntary immigrants have a negative dual frame of reference (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 170). A dual frame of reference can be defined as the way a person (or a group) perceives a situation in relation to another context (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 170). The significance of the dual frame of reference for this study is that it assists in understanding the belief system of the immigrants with respect to how they value the benefits accruing to them in terms of their immigration experience, as compared with what they left behind in their country of origin.

According to what CET suggests, if immigrant learners feel that their conditions in South Africa are far better than those in their home country, it should give them the ambition to want to excel in the host society and, of course, at school. According to CET, voluntary immigrants have a positive dual frame of reference because when they compare the opportunities available in their host societies with what they left behind, they conclude that their situation is far superior to what they had in their home country. On the other hand, involuntary immigrants have been reported to have a negative dual frame of reference because they perceive the idea of being middle class in their host society as being beyond their reach (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 170). An asset of CET is its capability to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary immigrants in the host society (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Its deficiencies are made clear in the debates on its inability to explain the academic performance of voluntary and involuntary immigrant students on a worldwide level (Foster, 2004; Hamann, 2004).

In the educational context, Ogbu's 1991 findings suggest that voluntary minorities have more positive attitudes toward schooling, teachers and the curriculum, whereas involuntary minorities avoid responsibility and assert blame on teachers and school administrators.

I made full use of what Ogbu terms a ‘dual frame of reference’, i.e. a cognitive perspective that allows immigrant learners to view the barriers that they face through the lens of the experiences in their home countries. Using this theoretical approach enabled me to probe the learners’ current experiences by asking them how these experiences would compare with learning at a school in their home country. This is a strategy to enable reticent learners to open up about their home country, in order for the study to gain a deeper understanding of the kind of background that learners come from.

### **3.3 Broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998)**

Academics argue that resilience is a quality is essential to overcoming the destructive effects of risk exposure (Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003), coping effectively with traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative paths associated with those risks (Werner, 1992; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten & Powell, 2003). Personality traits and environmental social resources are thought to mitigate the adverse effects of stress and encourage positive results in spite of the risks (Masten, 1994; Bernard, 2002; Kirby & Fraser, 1997). The construction of resilience depends on the existence of two factors: risk factors and protective factors, both of which reside within the learner’s multiple spheres of influence in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Risk factors are measurable characteristics among a group of individuals or their situation that predict a higher probability of a specific negative outcome (Masten & Reed, 2002). Protective factors, on the other hand, counterbalance risk factors to help students display positive adaptation in the face of adversity. In the context of struggling youth, these factors are related to the specific qualities of a person or context that predict better outcomes (Masten & Reed, 2002).

Bernard (1995) reports the significance of certain personality traits in building resilience, such as social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, a sense of purpose and future, and high positive expectations. The more resources young people have to draw on during times of trauma, the better their chances are of dealing with

struggles more efficiently (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003). Werner and Smith (1992) report that resilient children display good communication skills, a sense of accountability, compassionate approaches, an internal locus of control, a positive self-concept, and a belief in self-help.

As defined by Martin and Marsh (2008), 'academic resilience' refers to a student's ability to prevail over acute or chronic adversities that are seen as major assaults on educational processes. The term is used specifically in relation to highly vulnerable populations, and not in relation to the setbacks, challenges and pressures that are part of more regular academic life experienced by the majority of students. The term 'academic buoyancy' is rather used to refer to the many students who must negotiate the ups and downs of everyday academic life, which are seen as separate from the acute and chronic adversities related to the concept of academic resilience. Students who perform well in the classroom show a progressive self-evaluation of their academic rank at school (Wylie, 1979) and a sense of control over their academic success and failure (Stipek & Weisz, 1981; Dweck & Wortman, 1982; Willig, Harnisch, Hill, & Maehr, 1983). Gordon (1996) found that conviction in their own intellectual skills was one of the main dissimilarities between resilient and non-resilient Latino students in an urban school environment. The high academic achievers excelled because they believed in their own abilities to accomplish things.

Resilience research has also scrutinised those learners who are academically successful in spite of stressful events and circumstances during their youth and puberty (Alva, 1991; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). Well-established risk factors include being a minority student in a school, or coming from a low-income home where English is not the home language. Although there are many students who perform weakly and continue the downhill inclination (Dauber, Alexander, & Entwisle, 1996), there are a substantial number of others who manage to do well in school (Jimerson, Egeland, & Teo, 1999).

For the purpose of this study the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001) is used as a framework for understanding psychological

resilience among immigrant learners. Psychological resilience refers to effective coping and adjustment by people who are faced with loss, hardship, or difficulty (Fredrickson, 1998). The broaden-and-build theory posits that positive and negative emotions have different purposes, and different cognitive and physiological outcomes. This theory suggests that negative thoughts narrow one's momentary thought-action repertoire by preparing one to behave in a specific way (e.g. attack when angry, escape when afraid). In contrast, various positive emotions (e.g. joy, pleasure, interest) broaden one's thought-action repertoire, expanding the range of cognitions and behaviors that come to mind. These broadened mindsets, in turn, build an individual's physical, intellectual, and social resources.

Gradually, this broadened mindset might become a norm. Thus, the effect of experiencing a positive emotion is an increase in one's personal resources. Importantly, the reserve of personal resources produced by positive emotions can be drawn on in times of need and used to plan for future outcomes, which may be valuable in facilitating healthy behavioural practices (Fredrickson, 2000). While academic resilience refers to the pattern of positive academic achievement in the face of risk, we can surmise that positive emotion, or confidence in one's abilities to learn effectively, is one aspect of agency that can promote academic resilience. Students with strong positive emotions believe that they can reach desired outcomes through personal effort, and are therefore willing not only to set challenging goals, but also to persist while attempting to attain them (Bandura, 2006). Pressley et al. (2006) explored academic resilience in their study of American elementary and middle school students with histories of school failure. The researchers revealed the significance of successful experiences and an emphasis on student effort in building academic resilience, thus increasing students' overall school achievement. It was found that high efficiency contributes to achievement by increasing attention, memory, engagement, and commitment to appropriately challenging tasks.

One can infer from this theory that those immigrant learners who prevail in spite of difficult circumstances have the ability to broaden their mindsets with positive thinking and have, over time, broadened their mindsets. Their thought processes were examined during data collection and it was fascinating to test this theory and see if the



way learners think contributes significantly to their academic experiences being either positive or negative.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides an outline of the research design, the methods used for data collection and the theoretical framework that guided the data analysis. Sampling methods and the research site are also discussed. The chapter further discusses issues pertaining to rigour in qualitative research in order to ensure that trustworthiness was ensured in the context of narrative inquiry. The chapter concludes by reviewing the ethical issues and limitations of the study that were considered before data collection. The context of the practical arrangements made with research participants, and the practical decisions made regarding understanding and producing the data, are also described. A crucial feature of the approach used was the decision for me as a researcher to work closely with and listen to the immigrant learners.

#### **4.2 Paradigmatic suppositions**

This study utilised a qualitative methodology. In short, qualitative research is empirical research where the data generated is not in the form of numbers (Punch, 1998). Thus, the unequivocal difference between quantitative and qualitative research methods is that the former employs measurement, and the latter does not (Bryman, 2001). For this study, an interpretive paradigm was applied. Interpretivism asserts that humans constantly navigate through and give meaning to the dynamics of their world. Therefore, interpretivists proclaim that the world is constructed by humans, separating it from the natural world (Williamson, 2002). The interpretivist paradigm supports naturalistic inquiry with the research conducted in its actual setting, exercising inductive logic and giving prominence to qualitative data (Williamson, 2002). As the aim of the present study was to understand and interpret the academic experiences of immigrant learners, the methodology of interpretivism was chosen as the most suitable.

### **4.3 Research approach**

The research being conducted aimed to achieve a comprehensive knowledge of the participants' academic experiences at high school, hence the selection of a qualitative approach. The qualitative researcher seeks to discover the meanings that participants attach to their behaviour, how they interpret situations, and what their perspectives are on particular issues (Woods, 1993). Qualitative research is interested in why particular people (or groups) feel in particular ways, the processes by which these attitudes are constructed and the role they play in dynamic processes within the organisation or group (Palys, 2008). I am interested in examining the ways in which my participants achieve and experience academia within the school context, which is why I selected a qualitative approach.

### **4.4 Research design**

A narrative research design was chosen. Narrative inquiry is the interdisciplinary study of the activities involved in generating and analysing stories of life experiences (e.g. life histories, narrative interviews, journals, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, and biographies) and reporting that research (Schwandt, 2007 p. 204). By discovering and analysing the stories of my participants, I attempted to make meaning of their scholastic experiences. Narrative inquiry always begins in the midst of ongoing experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). In this process, learners continue to live their stories, even as they tell the stories of their experiences. Since this study aimed to tell the stories of immigrant learners, the narrative inquiry approach was deemed suitable.

### **4.5 Contexts and sampling**

A secondary school in Sydenham served as the research site for this study. The well-established school has been open for forty-six years and contains a diverse population of learners. The school has a relatively high proportion of African immigrant children — roughly 15%. The reason for selecting this school as the research site was because of the pool of immigrant learners that could be accessed. This was an important factor due to the unpredictability of adolescents and possible uncertainty of their parents.

Therefore, if one participant withdrew at any time, another participant could be selected from the group of immigrant learners available. All immigrant learners at this school are from African countries, with the majority originating from Burundi, Nigeria and Congo. This makes their shared ‘continent nationality’ a unifying thread between them. Six learners between the ages of 13 and 18 were chosen because of their suitability, i.e. they were born in another African country and have been residing in South Africa for less than ten years. These learners were selected as they were considered data rich, and they could contribute to the inquiry and assist in getting beneath the surface to generate “thick” description (Geertz in Charmaz, 2005, p. 14). Both males and females (three girls and three boys) were included in the selection and all the learners were between the ages of 13 and 18, the developmental stage of adolescence.

I am an educator at the school that was selected. This aided the research because issues of accessibility were reduced. I utilised two types of sampling: purposive and convenience sampling. With purposive sampling, the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience (Bernard 2002; Lewis & Sheppard 2006). Higginbottom (2004) described the convenience sample as “participants who are readily available and easy to contact” (p. 15). Although this explanation highlights obtainability, some convenience samples are more freely accessible than others; so even if a sample is convenient, some amount of effort will be involved in attaining and recruiting participants from that sample.

#### **4.6 Validity, reliability and trustworthiness**

*Trustworthiness* has become a qualitative measure of the rigour of one’s research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although researchers acknowledge that the quantitative definition of internal validity is impossible, they have developed ideas pertaining to *credibility* (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The question that concerns this criterion is whether the researcher has presented data in a manner that is credible to the respondents. In this study, I endeavoured to keep the research as accurate as possible by rereading transcripts and constantly asking my participants detailed

questions.

*Transferability* is the qualitative equivalent of the quantitative concept of external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It does not stress that the research project should be generalised to all similar studies, but rather, that the information that is garnered will be helpful to successive researchers of similar studies. Importantly, transferability occurs as a result of detailed, illustrative description, and the responsibility shifts from the researcher to individuals in other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This element was applied in this study by compiling detail-rich, comprehensive accounts of participants' experiences. In this way, future studies will have informative accounts of participants' experiences from which comparisons can be drawn.

*Dependability* focuses on the logic of the process of inquiry — the research design and methods employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). What kinds of data have been collected and over what period of time? Was the research collected over a determined period of time, or was it simply a rushed study with one visit and a few interviews? This study aimed to ensure dependability by collecting data over a determined period of time (ten weeks) with scheduled interviews and a predetermined focus group meeting.

Finally, *confirmability* asks that the research findings be clearly linked to analysis, data, and the research site (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The goal is to enable the reader to see the train of thought of the researcher to determine how he or she took a piece of data, analysed it, and then reached a conceivable conclusion. I aimed to achieve confirmability by continuously referring back to my critical questions and checking that every part of my research aimed to answer them, in order to link all sections of the research together and provide a coherent flow to the work.

#### **4.7 Methods of data generation**

The data tools used were a mix of semi-structured interviews, diary entries and a focus group discussion (with the use of a visual stimulus). The choice of these methods of narrative enquiry ensured that “The narrative qualities of lived and told

stories arise from the temporal nature of experience in which people are simultaneously participants in and tellers of their life stories” (Carr, 1986 p. 74). Due to the nature of the study, these methods were identified as undemanding, creative and safe for the underage participants. Interviews were used to provide the most direct form of evidence about the participants’ lives. They were semi-structured, to allow me to analyse the responses (Vithal & Jansen, 1997). All the immigrant learners had lived in the country for a minimum of five years and their English proficiency was sufficient for the purposes of my comprehension, as opposed to my lack of knowledge of or lack of fluency in their home languages.

#### **4.8 Data production**

The participants were asked for interview times that were suited to them (either before or after school hours or during break times) so that their scholastic experiences were unaffected by this study. During these times, I interviewed each participant once a week for a period of 10 weeks. I used a basic interview schedule with prepared questions but kept the questions open-ended and encouraged the participants to describe their experiences (Appendix 1). During the first interview I provided the participants with diaries and ask them to write down and record anything about their scholastic experiences and how they felt that these experiences may have impacted on them. The question that I asked the learners to keep in mind was, “What makes my experiences at school different from South African learners?”

The clarity that is required when a person writes down their thoughts allows a “reader to step into the participant’s inner mind and reach further into their interpretations of their behaviours, beliefs, and words” (Janesick, 1998, p.11). During one week I arranged for all the participants to gather for a focus group meeting. This is when I showed the participants a video about an immigrant’s experiences in the United States (the video is titled *In the Mix*. *In the Mix* is an American television documentary series for young adults, which covers a wide variety of relevant topics). After the screening of the video, their responses were examined by means of a discussion. Kitzinger (1994) maintains that focus groups are a beneficial method for discovering people's knowledge and experiences and can be used to explore not only what people

think but how they think and why they think that way. Gaining access to such a variety of communication is useful because learners' awareness and attitudes could not be adequately condensed into their responses to direct questions during the interviews.

#### **4.9 Data analysis**

Due to the narrative nature of this study, it was inevitable that I would surrender to the method of narrative analysis for interpreting data. Thus, my choice of analysis methodology was based on Rosenthal and Fischer-Rosenthal's (2004) analysis of narrative data. These authors draw a distinction between actual events and narratives, arguing that narratives must be based on some form of perception or observation of real events (Rosenthal & Fisher-Rosenthal, 2004). They have a six-stage process of analysis, which includes an analysis of biographical data, thematic analysis, reconstruction of the case history or life as it was lived, an analysis of individual texts, a process of comparison between a narrative and life as lived, and the formation of different types of narratives.

Narrative analysis differs from thematic analysis in two interconnected ways. Narrative analysis focuses more directly on the dynamic 'in process' nature of interpretation (Ezzy, 2002), that is, how the learners' interpretations might change with time, with new experiences, and with new and varied social interactions. Secondly, narrative analysis begins from the standpoint of the storyteller. From here the researcher can analyse how people, events, norms and values, organisations, and past histories and future possibilities, are made sense of and incorporated into their interpretations and subsequent actions. That is, narrative analysis contextualises the analysis process by focusing on the participant, rather than a set of themes.

#### **4.10 Ethical issues**

Ethical considerations are for the protection of the participants, who willingly present themselves for the purpose of enhancing our perceptions, and in doing so, make themselves vulnerable. Thus, a strict set of procedures and codes of conduct must be

implemented and adhered to, so as to protect these individuals. “The complexities of researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena raise multiple ethical issues for the researcher” (Mautherner, Birch, Jessop, & Miller, 2002, p. 1). Those engaged in the enterprise of educational research have traditionally been concerned with the ethical implications of their work (Eisner, 1998; Barone, 2000; Haverkamp, 2005). A primary ethical consideration is that the participants in this study were below the age of eighteen. I sought permission from their parents/guardians in order to secure study participation via a consent form (Appendices 3 and 4). Permission from the school was obtained from the school principal and the Department of Education. Learners were also asked to fill in an informed consent form in order to reassure them that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the project at any time (Appendices 5 and 6). They were informed that their confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained throughout the research process.

In order to protect participant confidentiality, I used pseudonyms on all notes, interviews and transcripts. In a document securely stored separately from all other research data, I recorded my use of pseudonyms. Furthermore, all raw data was accessible to me alone during the research collection process. The ultimate goal was complete confidentiality for every research participant, which Baez (2002) refers to as the “convention of confidentiality”. The convention of confidentiality is upheld as a means to protect the privacy of all participants, to build trust and rapport with study participants, and to maintain ethical criteria and the integrity of the research process (Baez, 2002). While carrying out the proposed study, I ensured that the stored research data remained secure and protected (through encryption and password protection), and I also protected the data by regularly creating a complete back-up which was stored separately from data I accessed on a daily or weekly basis. This ensured that, in the case of technical malfunction or other unforeseen problems, research data would not be lost.

#### **4.11 Limitations of the study**

There are a number of limitations to this study that deserve attention. First,



participation in this study was on a voluntary basis. According to Borg and Gall (1989), volunteer groups usually are not representative and tend to differ in motivation level from non-volunteers. Thus, the results of this study may not be generalisable to the entire population of immigrant learners. Generalisability is a common limitation of qualitative studies. Formal quantitative understandings of generalisability are generally unhelpful and not applicable in qualitative research. This is because statistical generalisations require random representational samples using data that is isolated from any particular context or situation. In contrast, qualitative research involves in-depth studies that generally produce historically and culturally situated knowledge. As such, this knowledge can never be seamlessly generalised to predict future practice (Tracy, 2010). Despite the inapplicability of statistical generalisation, knowledge generated through qualitative methods can still transfer and be useful in other settings, populations, or circumstances.

Indeed, good qualitative studies have “findings [that] can be extrapolated beyond the immediate confines of the site, both theoretically and practically” (Charmaz, 2005, p. 528). Instead of relying on formal generalisations, qualitative research achieves significance through transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), a process that is performed by the readers of the research. Transferability is achieved when readers feel as though the story of the research overlaps with their own situation and they intuitively transfer the research to their own action. For instance, someone learning about immigrant learners’ scholastic experiences may apply, or transfer, these ideas to their child’s situation in a school or university. I tried to create a study that invites transferability by gathering direct testimony, providing rich description, and writing accessibly. Thus transferability also relates to “evocative storytelling” (Ellis, 1995) — the production of an emotional experience in the reader. Evocative stories have the power to create in readers the idea that they have experienced the same thing in another arena.

Another limitation is that, since all of the participants in the study are foreign-born African immigrant students, their experiences as English learners and as immigrants represent only a subset of the population, albeit a numerically significant and growing population in South African schools. Although their academic experiences shed light

on important contextual elements of their schooling, they do not provide an exhaustive and complete account of immigrant students and/or English learners.

Due to the narrative nature of this study, the findings were predominantly generated from self-reported data. Self-reported data is a common limitation of narrative studies and was a chief limitation of my study. Self-reported data is limited by the fact that it can rarely be independently verified. I had to accept what people said, whether in the interviews or focus groups, at face value. A further factor to consider is the fact that all the participants in this study are adolescents. In the past, research generally has been conducted on children and youth. More recently there has been a move towards research with children, engaging them as active participants, recognising their rights, respecting their autonomy, and giving them voice (Grover, 2004). Although this was the direction that my research was striving towards, I recognise that teenagers are more susceptible to the limitations of self-reported data. According to Brutus et. al. (2013), self-reported data in qualitative studies contains several potential limitations regarding the distortion of events due to participants' perceptions:

1. Selective memory: when participants remember or forget experiences or events that occurred at some point in the past.
2. Telescoping: when participants recall events that occurred at one time as if they occurred at another time.
3. Attribution: when participants attribute positive events and outcomes to their own abilities but attribute negative events and outcomes to external forces.
4. Exaggeration: when participants embellish certain events as more significant.

I aimed to combat these limitations in a few important ways. I aimed to establish a rapport with the learners. My position was that if the participants did not trust me, they would not open up and describe their true feelings, thoughts, and intentions, because a complete rapport is established over time as people get to know and trust one another (Thomas, Nelson & Silverman, 2011). An important skill in interviewing is being able to ask questions in such a way that the respondent believes that he or she can talk freely. In this way I tried to be alert to both verbal and nonverbal messages and be flexible in rephrasing and pursuing certain lines of questioning. I used words

that were clear and meaningful to the respondent, and tried to ask questions so that the participant understood exactly what was being asked.

In the following chapter, an analysis and a discussion of the research findings are presented.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the key findings of the study within the theoretical framework proposed in Chapter Three, namely cultural ecological theory (Ogbu, 1990, 1991), and compares them with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. It also aims to provide answers to the research questions namely:

- What are the academic experiences of immigrant learners at school?
- How do immigrant learners experience academic achievement at high school?
- Why do they experience academic achievement in the way that they do?

The narratives of the academic performance and schooling experiences of the six immigrant students are presented using pseudonyms: Amanda (from Burundi), and Delilah and Noleen (both from the DRC) are the voluntary immigrants; the involuntary immigrants are Victor and Martin (both from the DRC), and Belinda (from Burundi). The voluntary immigrants are those who migrated to South Africa and willingly accepted their parents' decision to move to South Africa. The three involuntary immigrants did not want to migrate and were not happy with the decision that was taken by their families to move due to war or circumstances beyond their control. The participants are introduced in this chapter.

#### 5.2 Amanda

##### 5.2.1 Amanda's life history

Amanda was thirteen years old at the time of data collection, and is an immigrant from Burundi who speaks Swahili as her home language. She is the only girl out of five children. Amanda's parents made the decision to move to South Africa because the war in Burundi was worsening during Amanda's childhood. She said,

It was my parents' decision. I mean I don't know... they had some kind of struggle... because there is a tribe. They are kind of... what? Bias. The Tutsi and

Hutu tribes. So they kind of wanted to kill my dad. Because he was a Hutu. So the Tutsis wanted to kill him. So he had to move from that country to Rwanda.

Amanda's family moved to Rwanda before migrating to South Africa, and she has memories of living in both countries.

Amanda's mother was born in Burundi and her father was originally from the DRC. Both parents were gainfully employed in Burundi — her mother was a businesswoman and her father was a fashion designer. At the time of the research, Amanda's mother was unemployed and her father was employed as a tailor. Amanda spoke of the struggle they had: "When my dad first came here, he could not find a job. It was a struggle for almost a year. Now he is a tailor. But my mum still cannot get any professional work." Amanda and her family have experienced discrimination in many different contexts since they moved to South Africa. One instance that she recounted to me was as follows:

One time when my brother was sick, my mum went to the clinic, a Zulu clinic I think. Because she couldn't speak the language there was no help for her. Then my brother had to remain sick and there was no help for him.

Despite this, Amanda remains positive that they are "still better off in South Africa".

### **5.2.2 Academic performance and schooling experiences**

Amanda's performance was assessed from her school reports. Because I was her English teacher, I had unrestricted access to her academic record. Her performance in school was above average, with excellent marks in Mathematics, Arts and Culture, and Life Orientation. Having taught Amanda, I observed her keenness to learn, which was demonstrated by always volunteering to answer questions and asking me for additional work over and above the assigned classroom exercises. She displayed a high level of resilience regarding potential obstacles to her school education, and this emerged from discussions of her schooling experiences, during which the topics of the stress of learning English, being teased for not knowing Zulu and her average performance in school arose:

My dad always says that there are no benefits without a sacrifice and no sacrifice without benefits. So I sacrificed my happy times so that it wouldn't affect my schoolwork or my family. Because there used to be a time where I would go home and cry and I couldn't eat and my mum was unhappy about my situation so I tried my best to get over all of that and try harder at school.

She mentioned how she implored other South African learners to help her in order to help her overcome the difficult times:

As with everything, there are always good and bad sides. So I always tried to ask my friends to help me and not to laugh at me when I say something the wrong way. So next time, other people would not laugh at me.

Broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2000) posits that students who possess strong positive emotions believe that they can reach desired outcomes in spite of any crippling challenges that they may face. It is evident in Amanda's dialogue that she has strong psychological resilience. In times of difficulty, she draws upon positive emotions for her thought-action repertoire and hence, is able to overcome discrimination. It is clear that her parents are largely responsible for this broadened mindset that enables her to possess a wide range of positive emotional resources.

She narrated her early schooling experiences as stressful because when she first moved here, she had to learn more than one new language:

It was very stressful because I was learning Zulu to socialise and English to pass at school but I was failing the term! And at home it was bad because at home my mum was not speaking English and my dad wasn't good at English either. So it was hard for me.

Like most immigrant children, Amanda was teased about her inability to speak a South African language. She says that when she tried,

... they laughed at me because I didn't know how to pronounce any words and say them exactly how they were supposed to be said. And the language

that I knew sounded so strange to them. They had never heard it before. They made fun of my language and the way I spoke.

Amanda spoke of how she experienced discrimination from not just the learners. She had to deal with teachers who could not understand her situation.

As far as I can remember in my primary years, when I was in grade two, one of the teachers used to ask me questions and I couldn't respond to the teacher and she used to get fierce with me. Because I was kind of quiet and I never used to talk to others so she just used to get crazy with me... she would tell me to go and sit outside for the entire day if I couldn't answer any questions.

According to Alva (1991), there are many risk factors that can prevent a learner from achieving well at school. Here we can see that in spite of the risk factors that Amanda is faced with, including being a minority student in the school, and coming from a low-income home where English is not the home language, she has managed to display resilience at primary school and has continued to achieve well at high school.

In order to examine Amanda's dual frame of reference, she was asked whether she thought she was better off at school here than in Burundi. Amanda was adamant that she was better off in South Africa. She spoke about the many barriers to learning in Burundi, such as how teachers were often absent, and how on some days the schools were closed so no learning could take place. She also wrote in her diary about how difficult it would be for her to study further than high school in Burundi because there are so few universities that the country cannot cope with the number of prospective students. She compared Burundi to South Africa, where she feels that she could study whatever she wants to at an institution of her choosing. Amanda's viewpoint is consistent with the element of Ogbu's (1991) theory that states that voluntary immigrants have a positive dual frame of reference. Amanda's feelings support the idea that if immigrant learners feel that their experiences in South Africa are far better than what they would have experienced had they stayed in their home country, it should give them the ambition to want to excel at school. This holds true for Amanda

because she is focused on achieving as much as she can and has many ambitions for her future.

Studies have shown that immigrant children are predisposed to growing “up with strong ties to two countries, two cultures, and two ways of being, which can produce multiple realities, multiple ways of being and communicating with the world” (Rodriguez, 2009, p. 17). Therefore, in order to gauge whether Amanda was assimilating into her host society, several questions were posed to her in order to elicit responses aimed at measuring her sense of belonging at school. Amanda said, “All my friends are South Africans”, but remained resolute in the belief that she is, “Not South African”. When asked if she is Burundian, she replied with a firm, “No.” She identifies herself as,

... a foreigner here. I am here in other people’s countries. Not at home here or there. Although I grew up here, I don't have a feeling of home because I cannot speak the languages and I cannot dress the way they do. I cannot go back to Burundi either... it will not be the same. So I am just a foreigner.

Rather than make her confused, this identity urges her to go on achieving at a high standard and seems to motivate her to do well. She says, “I came here to have a better life and so I must work hard for the future whether I stay here or not.” The last question I asked was whether Amanda would like to go back to Burundi. She explained that when she first came to South Africa, she would have liked nothing more than return to Burundi. However, she says,

If I went back now then maybe... they would discriminate against me. Because of the way I speak and my hobbies. Some of the things about me have changed compared to the way I should’ve grown up if I was still in Burundi. And I have forgotten some of my culture... so I belong here for now.

## **5.3 Noleen**

### **5.3.1 Noleen’s life history**



Noleen was fourteen years old when she was interviewed, and she was born in Uvira, a city in the DRC. She came to South Africa when she was seven years old and has only a few memories of her childhood in the DRC. Noleen explained to me why her family had had to move to South Africa:

Basically because of the war. People don't like each other... there is too much witchcraft going on. Like my young brother who comes home one afternoon... He died of poisoning. I don't know what happened... when he came home one day, he was dead. My mum gave birth to seven children. Only four are left now.

She wrote in her diary that she was very eager to move to South Africa. She had heard that South Africa was the land of great things and this made her eager to move. According to cultural ecological theory, Noleen's willingness to migrate to her host country in search of a better life makes her a voluntary immigrant.

Noleen's parents were successful in the DRC. Her father used to import and export textiles for clothes and her mother owned a restaurant, which she sold when they moved to South Africa. Now her father is a plumber and she was embarrassed to admit that her mother sells avocados on the roadside. Noleen mentioned that they lived in a big house in the DRC. Although it had no electricity or running water, they were able to live with only their family. In South Africa, Noleen admits that her living conditions are not great: "We live in a two-bedroom house but we rent a bedroom and share it with another family." Noleen also says that her family is part of a strong Christian community. She mentions that people in South Africa view religion very differently to people in the DRC: "People here are more involved in the world. Like in Congo, Christianity is very high. They believe in God and they pray a lot. But here, it's very different." Noleen has fond memories of the DRC and talks about how things were different there:

...not many people had televisions in Congo. Like you would find one person having a TV and they would invite all of their family and friends. But it was also fun there because at night we would just sit around the fire and talk

stories with family and friends. You can even go outside here. It's strange to me.

I used this information to investigate Noleen's dual frame of reference. Noleen often stated: "I am fortunate to be here". She said that she would not have been able to attend school in the DRC because of the war and even if she had continued her schooling there, she would definitely have performed poorly. She said that even though things were different in the DRC, she feels safer here in South Africa because the country is stable and prosperous. Noleen's optimistic outlook is consistent with Ogbu's (1991) findings that voluntary immigrants have a positive frame of reference, believing their life in the host country to be superior to a life in their country of origin.

### **5.3.2 Academic performance and schooling experiences**

Noleen's academic record is outstanding. At the time of the interviews she was one of the top achievers in her grade and excelled in all subjects, especially Mathematics. Noleen completed Grade One and Two in the DRC and she compared the Congolese and South African schooling systems by saying that school in South Africa is very easy when compared with school in the DRC. She mentioned that she had actually failed Grade Two in the DRC, so when she came to South Africa she was surprised at how well she was performing. When questioned on what makes school in the DRC more difficult, she said that learning in the medium of French was far more difficult and corporal punishment made school more daunting. However, she stressed that the main difference between attending school in the DRC and school in South Africa is the issue of respect. She said:

It is weird here. Because in Congo, if you don't treat a teacher with respect, they would hit you. So in Congo, learners have respect for their teachers compared to here where there isn't any respect for anyone.

She said that she feels sad about this but tries her best to remain respectful because that is the way of her culture.

Noleen displayed a lot of resilience regarding her academic experiences at school. She admitted that her living conditions are quite poor, but said:

My mum always said, ‘Never let anything in life hold you back’. And I try not to do that. My uncle also came from Congo and now he is a doctor in Pretoria. He tells me, ‘we are so lucky to have studied here in South Africa. We must work hard and go back and help our country’ and that is what I want to do.

Consistent with the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001), Noleen has found an effective way of coping with and adjusting to her school environment in spite of the difficulties she has encountered. She has an expansive range of positive personal resources that she draws upon when needed rather than letting herself be consumed by negative thoughts and negative behaviours. We can surmise that Noleen’s resilience is a key factor in her admirable academic performance in school, allowing her to excel in spite of the risk factors she faces.

Noleen did not view learning English as a hindrance to her education. Rather, she mentioned that she began to learn English in the DRC when she knew that her family was coming to South Africa:

Yes, it helped me. Cartoons also helped me to learn English here. It didn’t take me long to learn English because children around me were speaking it. And I would try to take some words and put it in my head like that.

I examined Noleen’s perceptions of the school factors according to Ogbu and Simons (1998). Initially, like Amanda and other immigrant children, her peers in primary school teased her.

The children here... they would tease you like you don’t know English. They would call you a foreigner — but now I am used to it. I used to feel alone. I was missing friends that I left in Congo and I wondering why we came here. But now my English is better and I can understand everything. I know that I am so fortunate to be learning here.

Noleen did not define her experiences at school as discrimination, and seemed accepting of the initial hardship. Instead, she said that she has never experienced discrimination but she has seen other Congolese children discriminated against because of their accent, appearance and body odour. She did say that if she experienced the sort of discrimination that these other learners experienced, she would still continue to do well at school no matter what.

Noleen's outlook is consistent with Ogbu's (1987) findings that if immigrant learners perceive their life in the host country to be better than their life in their original country, then they will aim to achieve higher. This is evident in Noleen's excellent school grades. Furthermore, Ogbu (1990) postulates that voluntary immigrants rationalise the discrimination they experience by concentrating on the benefits of their position in the host society. Noleen exhibits this behaviour because she brushes off name calling and teasing in favour of reiterating, "I am fortunate to be here".

I asked Noleen if she feels South African because she has done so well for herself here. Her answer was a resolute no and she explained why:

I don't feel South African because I don't identify with the culture here. The Zulu traditions are so weird. When they go to dance for the king and they are topless... that's different for me. In Congo, that's not allowed. If someone saw me and thought I was South African, I would be ok about it but I am Congolese. It is who I am.

Noleen emphasised that when she came to South Africa she ignored what people said about her, remained close to her family and did not lose any of her culture.

## **5.4 Delilah**

### **5.4.1 Delilah's life history**

Delilah was the oldest participant in this study. At the time of the research she was 16 years old, and was a top achiever in Grade Eleven, as well as a school prefect. She moved to South Africa from the DRC when she was five years old, and as a result has

few memories of life in the DRC. However, she did point out that she recalls going to the local tap to fetch water and finding wood for their stove. She compared this with where she lives in South Africa and said that they now have running water and electricity so she prefers to live here. Delilah and her parents came to South Africa from the DRC in 2001. She says that their reasons for leaving were simple:

Because we got sick a lot and because it was an undeveloped country it was difficult for us to find a job. My father was a zookeeper in Congo so that really helped us. So he used to pay for the house and food and clothes. But it was not enough.

Delilah and her family can be classified as voluntary immigrants because they chose to leave the DRC in search of a higher standard of living. Delilah said that she was very excited when she heard that she was coming to South Africa because she did not want to go to school in the DRC and she wanted her life to be, "...like in the movies".

Delilah related that most of the discrimination she and her family experienced in the early years was as a result of language.

The language made it difficult... because when they realised that you aren't from here, the people this side want to help people who speak the same language and they know that you aren't from here because it's a little bit difficult for them to communicate with you. People avoid you.

She mentioned that her expectations prior to arriving in South Africa were vastly different from the reality she now faces, and she lamented the situation that her family is currently in:

Now that I am here... well... the situation that I am in right now, its not in a good situation. Like its making me wonder and asking myself why I cam here. Because my dad is a heart disease patient. Neither of my parents work. We used to get money from the church but now no one helps us. So we are having a tough time. I feel disappointed with us.

Bearing this in mind, I asked Delilah if she felt that her life would have been better if they had stayed in the DRC. She stated unequivocally that even though their life in South Africa is currently bad, she believes that it will improve, especially when she finishes school. However, in the DRC their lives were bad with no sign of improvement. She emphasised that it is almost impossible to get yourself out of a difficult life in the DRC but in South Africa it is possible, and therefore their lives in South Africa are better than if they had stayed in the DRC. She mentioned the access to education, infrastructure, technology and wide variety of food as some of the reasons that their lives have improved since moving to South Africa. Her awareness of these opportunities and her willingness to exploit them to maximum benefit tie in with the findings of Ogbu and Simons (1998), which state that voluntary immigrants make the most of the benefits and opportunities available in their new country.

#### **5.4.2 Academic performance and schooling experiences**

Delilah's academic performance was evaluated through reported grades and was found to be exceptional. Her English and Mathematics marks were high distinctions and none of her other marks were below 70%. This was in spite of the tough circumstances that she faced at home at the time.

Delilah responded to questions about prejudice, bullying and isolation at school by taking about her years in primary school:

In primary school I experienced a lot of discrimination because there were a lot of learners from foreign countries and we have been discriminated against a lot because of where we come from, the language that we speak and the food we eat. Maybe they would tease us... they would tell us "Go back to your country" and they would ask us, "What are we doing here?" and just make us feel unwelcome.

Delilah stressed that discrimination never happened to her on an individual basis, but rather that all the immigrant learners in the school were teased collectively. She displayed resilience when asked how she overcame the discrimination:

It made me feel bad but I didn't take it to heart because I was coming to school to learn. My focus was not on the way I felt, my focus was on school. My friends and I spent more time with people that liked us than people that didn't like us.

She spoke a lot about her future and how she hoped to qualify as a doctor after she finishes school. Delilah's stance that her schoolwork was a priority was typical of an immigrant learner who has come here primarily to study, no matter how difficult her circumstances may be. It is evident that Delilah possesses a wealth of personal resources that have created a strong sense of resilience that helps her when she is faced with a tough situation. Her ability to project a better future for herself and her family is indicative of a mature learner with a high level of academic resilience. Her positive academic achievement in the face of risk displays her belief and confidence in her abilities to learn effectively and achieve success. Once again it is clear that high academic achievement has been coupled with high levels of resilience, as outlined by Doll and Lyon (1998).

## **5.5 Victor**

### **5.5.1 Victor's life history**

Victor left the DRC in 2009 after spending most of his childhood in his hometown, Lubumbashi. At the time of the interviews he had been in South Africa for five years and was 17 years old; however, he was only in Grade Nine. Victor talked sadly about his life in the DRC by describing it in one word:

Poverty... everything is poverty. Everywhere is poverty. How we lived was poverty. There was no food for us. There was water but we had to pay the owner of the tap. It was poverty.

Victor's immediate family still resides in the DRC. He was sent to South Africa to stay with his uncle (with whom he still resides) because his mother could no longer afford to send him to school while still supporting her other three sons. Victor missed his family intensely and in his diary, he wrote of his family longingly: "I don't miss

Congo for the food or the weather or the place. I only miss Congo because of my mother and brothers.” During the interview I asked Victor if he is angry that his mother sent him away. He replied:

No not anymore. Now I worry. I don't know what kind of job my mother is doing. She sends me money but I don't know anything about them. I don't even know if I will see them again.

Victor said that he has been discriminated against in South Africa many times. The thing he hated the most about not being South African was the term, *ikwerekwere*. He said that he could handle being teased about his language or culture but hated being called *ikwerekwere*. He explained why:

Because if they call me like that, it means that the country that I came from... I didn't run away from fighting in the war... I came here because my mother sent me this side. So if they are calling me that name... I don't feel nice because I didn't want to come here.

I asked Victor about his expectations before coming to South Africa and he said he didn't expect to speak English or see any white people. Victor's dual frame of reference was negative and he felt that his life would have been better had he stayed in the DRC and not been separated from his mother and brothers. I asked Victor what people in the DRC think about South Africa and he replied wearily:

They think it's the most richest country ever. That's what they think. Because people who have come to South Africa when they go there to Congo, they tell them, there is no dirt there, there's no poverty. But I don't believe it because I have seen it. There is dirt. There is poverty.

Victor's jaded outlook on life in South Africa ties in with Ogbu's theory (1990, 1991) that involuntary immigrants perform poorly due to community forces that overcome them, and that they possess an oppositional identity (Ogbu, 1991). Involuntary immigrants develop an oppositional identity in terms of their perceptions. They perceive low chances of success for themselves in mainstream society. They are acutely aware of all the economic, social, and political barriers against them and feel



that they cannot rise above them. In the same way, Victor felt helpless about his situation in South Africa:

Sometimes when I am alone, I don't know what I am doing here and why I am here. I don't think there is anything I can do to help myself and if there is, I don't think anything will help me. Not without my family.

### **5.5.2 Academic performance and schooling experiences**

As Victor's Social Science teacher, I had access to his academic records. Victor consistently performs poorly in all subjects, especially English. His highest mark is for Arts and Culture, which is 47%. He explained that initially when he came to South Africa, he thought he would be going to a French school. He had no prior experience speaking English and had only heard it on television shows. In his first year in South Africa, Victor was placed in Grade Seven but didn't pass and had to repeat Grade Seven the following year. He spoke about his experience in the English classroom:

When I do a speech I have to write it in French and then find my cousin to help me in English. When I was doing the speech, there was an echo... people were saying what I was saying because of the way I sound. It happens often.

It has been observed worldwide that many immigrant children experience discrimination when they are not proficient in the mainstream language (Souto-Manning, 2009). Also, the inability to speak the local language makes immigrant children vulnerable to persecution from their indigenous peers (Von Grünigen et al., 2010, p. 688). Victor's personal experience illustrates this point clearly and uncovers a possible reason for his lack of motivation at school.

Victor displayed little to no resilience in relation to his school situation. He had no confidence in his capabilities because he wrote in his diary that he would like to do better in school but didn't know what to do. This is characteristic of non-resilient learners, as identified by Dweck and Wortman (1982), who have no sense of control over their academic success or failure. As outlined in the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998), negative thoughts prevent learners from developing academic

resilience, which provides an explanation for why Victor is unable to rise above the setbacks he faces. His negative self-concept and adverse outlook regarding his possible achievement contribute greatly to his weak academic performance.

Victor said that he is lonely without the support of his mother and does not know what he will do after school. Cultural ecological theory (Ogbu, 1978) defines involuntary immigrants as those who have been brought to their host country either by force or because they have no choice. Victor made it clear to me that he felt that he had no choice in the matter of coming to South Africa. His poor academic performance seems consistent with the theoretical framework that involuntary immigrants perceive that there is no academic culture that encourages immigrant learners to perform well at school.

## **5.6 Martin**

### **5.6.1 Martin's life history**

When Martin was ten years old, he moved to South Africa from the DRC. Unlike the other study participants, his family did not move because of war, poverty or finances; they moved to South Africa because his father, who is a pastor, received a calling from God to come to South Africa and open a ministry. Initially, only Martin's father moved to South Africa. At first he struggled and after two years he was finally able to have the rest of his family move to be with him. Martin talks about his father's decision to move by saying,

We had a good life in Congo. Things were better. A big house, water, stove... I was doing well in school. Then we had to come here so my father could follow his calling... I understand that it was from God but... it wasn't easy. Not easy at all.

Martin stressed the many ways in which his life was better in the DRC: "The way people live in Congo is not the way people live here. In Congo if you don't have something, you would go to your neighbour. Here, it's very hard to say anything. Nobody will help you."

Martin said that his family is doing well now but at first it was not easy. His mother and father had to be car guards and sometimes earned R30 on a good day. The church people helped them a lot but the family still took strain. Martin also discussed the ways language has acted as a barrier for him since he came to South Africa and related an incident:

In 2008, when I was eleven, I lost my bus fare but only found out when I was on the bus. I had no choice about what to do... I wanted to explain to the bus driver but I couldn't speak any Zulu or much English. I was not alone, I was with other friends from Congo but they could not speak or understand either. When it was time to get off, we tried to run away but the driver got angry and left us at the end of his route, in Pinetown. We were so scared and didn't know what to do. We stayed there for a whole night because we didn't know where we were or how to get home without money. The next morning a Metro Policewoman found us and found our schoolbooks. She took us back to school and our parents came for us. It was the worst experience of my life. When I think about it, I wish I could go back to Congo.

Martin seemed to experience some conflict between his belief in God and his experiences here in South Africa. He wanted to believe that his father had made the best move for the family and that God would provide; however, he truly missed his life in the DRC and believed that their life was better there. He summed it up by saying: "The situation we are living in, I'm not happy with it but I also know that everything happens by God's will."

### **5.6.2 Academic performance and schooling experiences**

Martin's academic performance was evaluated through reported grades and was found to be excellent. He excelled at Mathematics and Science, and even though his performance in his language subjects was not outstanding, it was still good. He said that he knows he can do better in school but he has difficulties writing and understanding English. About his teachers he said: "I like the way they teach because they try to make sure that I understand the work. But I am lazy... I don't do the

homework in some subjects so my marks are ok; not so good.” Martin admitted that sometimes he relies on other immigrant learners to help him by explaining the work to him in Lingala or French; only then is he able to understand.

The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001) theorises that learners who display psychological resilience will achieve greater success than those who display little to no resilience. As a result of a low self-concept and a lack of belief in their abilities, the learners who display no resilience will not be able to overcome the setbacks that hinder their progress academically. However, in the case of Martin, it was clear that he felt responsible for his grades. He understood that he could do better and that he did not work hard enough in the subjects he did not enjoy. Martin believed that he could do better; he just chose not to try harder. It did seem that Martin has personal resources that he can draw upon to help him defeat destructive thoughts, especially pertaining to his faith in God. This shows us that Martin does display some resilience that promotes his good academic performance.

Martin wrote in his diary that he does not feel comfortable at school and, as a result, does not say much. He has been called *ikwerekwere* by indigenous learners and sits alone when in school. One of the indicators of learners’ integration into the host society is by investigating whether they would want to return to their home country (Adebanji, 2010). I asked Martin if he has any plans to go back to Congo and he replied, “Yes I do. But I can only go back if I make some money first. I need to try harder in school but I know that I sometimes am lazy.” I asked Martin about his friends and he said that his friends are from Congo, Zimbabwe and Burundi. He said the following about South African learners:

I don't like the way they do things. They like fighting too much. They like to disrespect the teachers. They gamble and they smoke drugs. I don't do these things and I don't like these things.

In order to understand how Martin constructs his identity, I asked him to write about whether he feels South African. He wrote:

Part of me is still in Congo. I am Congolese. South Africa is only a place to make money not a life... I can never be a South African because I don't do what they do.

## **5.7 Belinda**

### **5.7.1 Belinda's life history**

Belinda immigrated to South Africa from Burundi when she was ten years old. At the time of the data collection she was 13 years old. Belinda explained the circumstances of her family's move to South Africa:

My father was working for the government... and then the war started... so they started looking for my father. They wanted to kill him. He came this side. And he left my mother and us. He came to South Africa with his cousin. Then they heard that was my father was this side. They came looking for my mother. They cut her leg... They said, "We are coming next time to kill you." So we ran with my mother to escape the soldiers. She went to Tanzania to her sister. Then my father said, must come this side to South Africa.

Belinda came to South Africa because of the war in her home country and she therefore she falls into the category of involuntary immigrant. Belinda's statement, "...we ran with my mother to escape the soldiers", shows us that her move to South Africa was an act of desperation in an attempt to flee the conflict in her home country, thus making her an involuntary immigrant.

Belinda experienced further trauma when she came to South Africa. Her mother tragically passed away in 2012:

She was pregnant. And after giving birth... I don't know... they say the doctors gave her the wrong injection. And she died. We don't know what happened, we couldn't understand the hospital or what was going on.

Belinda also talked about how difficult it has been for her father to get a job in South Africa. She said that he was the principal of a primary school in Burundi but when he

came here, the only job he could get was washing cars. At the time of the interviews he worked at a KFC fast food outlet, but was still struggling to support the family. Belinda said frequently: “I don't know what to do. I just don't know about anything in my life.”

### **5.7.2 Academic performance and schooling experiences**

I was permitted to access Belinda's academic record because I teach her English. Overall her grades were poor, with her highest mark being 56% for Arts and Culture. Belinda was forthright about her inability to perform well at school: “I cannot manage school. It is because of how bad I feel about life... and because my English is so bad”. She speaks Kirundi at home with her family, Swahili at school with her Burundian peers, and English to her teachers. According to Yeh et al. (2008), language is a link between cultures because people gain access to other cultures via the tool of language. With that in mind, I asked Belinda how she has coped with the language barrier. Belinda said that she was focusing her energies on learning isiZulu so that she could communicate better with the South African learners in her class:

I tried to make friends with the South African learners but it was hard! But I want to make new friends so I have to learn Zulu to fit in. Because when I used to join a group of Zulu girls, they couldn't speak any English. Most of them couldn't understand any English, only their own language. So I have to force myself to learn Zulu to be able to talk with them and laugh when they are laughing.

As a result of this desire to fit in with South African learners, Belinda was spending her time learning Zulu, and consequently she did not focus on improving her English. In her diary, the language is grammatically incorrect but still coherent. She mentioned that she cannot write a lot of English and she doesn't know how to construct essays. These deficiencies are holding her back in most of her subjects, especially English, Social Science and Life Orientation.

Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick and Sawyer (2003) postulate that resilience is the principal method of coping effectively with traumatic experiences. Belinda seems

to lack resilience because she often shrugged when I asked her questions about her life and possible future. According to the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998), positive emotions broaden one's mindset and assist in building up a wealth of personal resources that one can draw upon in times of emotional difficulty. Consequently, the more resources young people have to draw on during times of trauma, the better their chances are of dealing with struggles more efficiently (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003). Belinda displays a lack of personal resources because instead of overcoming setbacks with positive thinking, she feels helpless and accepts the setback instead of dealing with it effectively. Her lack of resilience has a significant negative impact on her academic experiences and performance. As Pressley et al. (2006) explain, resilience increases learners' overall school achievement and it is clear that Belinda's lack of resilience hinders her success at school.

Belinda also spoke extensively about other challenges she faces at school: "When the other learners go to smoke or gamble, I feel bad." She found the lack of discipline to be a hindrance to her learning and mentioned that she was often distracted by the rude behaviour towards the teachers and the flagrant disobedience displayed by South African learners. She said:

In Burundi, our teachers are our parents. We respect them because they are elder. Here I cannot learn because of the way learners treat the teacher. It hurts my head.

Belinda also talked about the discrimination she experienced at school. In her diary she wrote that learners laugh at her clothes when they are allowed to wear casual clothes on special days because she dresses modestly and in the style of her home country. She recalled another incident when she experienced discrimination:

In class we were talking about our homes and when I tried to talk about mine, another learner shouted at me and South Africa is not my home and I must go back to my country to my real home.

In order to gauge Belinda's level of acculturation in South African society, I asked her some questions about the construction of her identity. Belinda maintained that she is

not South African and can never think of herself in that way. She said: “Burundi is where I belong. I will go back when the war is over.” I asked her why she does not feel South African and she replied, “I am not like them and they are not like me. We only share a country not beliefs.”

Belinda was the only participant who admitted that she just could not cope. She expressed a bleak and hopeless attitude about her situation: “I am tired of trying so hard in this country”. When I asked her if she thinks her life would’ve been better in Burundi, she remains silent for a while before answering:

Maybe if they weren’t trying to kill my father... we could’ve stayed and I could’ve gone to school in Burundi with my friends. But if we stayed... they would’ve killed us. So I don’t know.

She wrote in her diary that it is likely that if they had stayed in Burundi, her mother would still be alive. She is resentful toward South Africa mainly because of the death of her mother as well as their family’s financial predicament. As a result, she shows no interest in fitting into South African society or performing well at school. This is consistent with cultural ecological theory, which maintains that community forces, such as the way immigrants are treated, welcomed or not welcomed into the host society, play a huge role in how immigrant learners perceive their situation. From Belinda’s accounts of the events that have occurred in her life, she feels that she (and her family) have not been warmly welcomed into South African society. According to Ogbu and Simons (1998) her negative attitude toward community forces contributes to her poor academic performance. Cultural ecological theory also states that involuntary immigrants have a negative dual frame of reference because they believe that their lives would have been better had they stayed in their home country. Belinda certainly feels that her life would have been better because her mother’s chances of survival in Burundi would have been higher.

## **5.8 Discussion of findings**

In certain ways the academic experiences of the six immigrant learners were clearly different, yet they displayed certain common aspects. The learners arrived in South



Africa at different times in their lives, for varying reasons. Some were accompanied by family, and others were not. All the participants experienced financial instability when they first came to South Africa, and for some this economic predicament is ongoing. Mantovani and Martini (2008) suggest that one of the ways to ascertain the well-being of immigrant children in their host society is to establish how well they are doing academically at school. The academic performances in this study varied, with some learners performing exceptionally well, some producing mediocre grades, and some clearly not coping at all.

### **5.8.1 Language as a barrier**

An impediment to the linguistic transition of immigrant children in South Africa involves the use of 11 official languages in South Africa, as shown generally by Sookrajh et al. (2005, p. 6). Thus, a common element in the narrative of all the participants was the language barrier, as none of them were fluent in English before arriving in South Africa and their schooling experiences were marred because of the huge problem that this language deficit presented. Unlike findings from Karsten (2006) and Nusche (2009), which state that educators in schools often find the bilingual abilities of immigrant learners to be a hindrance in the classroom, all learners in this study said that the teachers 'tried their best' to help them whenever possible, regardless of the level of English proficiency displayed.

The literature indicates that the extent of adjustment of immigrant children to a new culture can be interpreted by observing their capability to learn the language of communication in the host society. According to Yeh, Okubo, Ma, Shea, Ou and Pituc (2008), communication is vital to the adjustment of immigrant children in a new society. Communication is enhanced through language (Soto, 1997) because language is a crucial tool for interaction, both in the classroom and on the playground (Gupta, 2009). Language acquisition has therefore been proved to be a key element for the adjustment into society, and consequently high academic achievement. The learning progress of all the learners was hindered by their low proficiency in the language of teaching and learning. None of them speak English as a home language and there were no remedial actions taken by the school or parents to help improve their

proficiency in the language of instruction (English). Some learners relied on other immigrant learners to assist them with linguistic problems while others asked their South African friends. Upon observation it was found that most immigrant learners tended to group with other foreign students during break times, and when travelling to and from school. When they grouped together, the language spoken was French. Learners who were better at expressing themselves in English tended to do better in all subjects, as indicated by their grades. Therefore, this study supports Yeh et al.'s (2008) conclusion that English language proficiency is a tool that assists immigrants to comprehend academic work.

Overall, a comparison of the findings of this study and the findings in the existing literature review revealed some parallels. First, among immigrants from non-English speaking countries, it was discovered (Fantino & Colak, 2001; Nsubuga-Kyobe & Dimock, 2002) that concerns involving language expertise should be addressed, so as not to weaken their academic potential at school. This study supports the findings of Collier (1995), Fantino and Colak (2001) and Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock (2002), who demonstrate that it is essential to tackle the language concerns of immigrant students coming to an environment with a different language of instruction.

### **5.8.2 A sense of belonging**

Secondary school is an important social setting where learners develop relationships with each other in a significant way that may have a large impact on learning behaviour and motivation, and which accordingly influences academic performance (Bygren & Szulkin, 2010). The participants who claimed to have stable social lives, positive relationships and high levels of resilience, like Amanda, Noleen and Delilah, display higher levels of academic achievement and productive learning behaviour, as well as ambition. Osterman (2000) asserts that a sense of isolation and a lack of belonging with peers is a major contributor to negative academic achievement. The results of this study prove this to be true. Victor is a learner who says he feels isolated at school and Belinda says she feels isolated from South African society despite her attempts to make friends and fit in. Both of these learners have poor academic achievement, low levels of resilience and a lack of ambition. Furthermore, in line with

Ogbu's theory, these learners are involuntary immigrants, and thus lack commitment and focus. Therefore, coupled with their feeling of isolation, their academic performance is poor.

The formation of a sense of belonging among immigrant learners in an academic institution is essential to their acceptance by others and therefore to escaping acts of discrimination, as suggested by Asanova (2005). In this study, the participants didn't feel as though they really belonged in South African society. Even though Amanda, Noleen and Delilah didn't feel isolated, they did not feel as though they fitted in to South African society. Using Asanova's presupposition (2005), it is clear that the participants' academic experiences were characterised by trials ranging from prejudice to xenophobia, isolation and exclusion throughout their schooling careers. These trials were possibly due to a lack of a sense of belonging, but at the same time these discriminatory experiences were also the factor that kept them from feeling integrated into their communities and society as a whole. Hence, it is argued in this study that when their schooling experiences are favourable, immigrant children become comfortable and proficient at developing a sense of belonging. Their development of a sense of belonging becomes a strength that is able to integrate them into society as a whole and allow them to focus their attention on exhibiting high levels of academic achievement. Their capacity for positive academic achievement seems embedded in the lack of discriminatory acts against them.

A sense of belonging is clearly an important part of an immigrant learner's academic and schooling experiences. Billman, Geddes and Hedges (2005) find that belonging offers encouragement for children to survive in a new school environment and fosters full achievement of their academic potential. A sense of belonging also indicates the extent of attachment to the school and the entire learning that happens as a result of this (Wenger, 1998). This is because learning includes every experience that children are exposed to, both academic and non-academic (Wenger, 1998). The primary ways that learners want to belong at school are through acceptance by social groups and through making friends. In the case of some participants, they were part of social groups that included indigenous South African learners. This inclusion was motivated by the need to make friends, to belong and to learn the dominant culture. However, a

common trait was that these immigrant learners were not easily welcomed into social groups by South African learners, and acceptance only occurred if the dominant language was being spoken and understood by the participant. The dominant language in the school is isiZulu and this is what the learners had to learn in order to be acknowledged by the native students. The experiences of the learners align with the finding of Vidali and Adams (2007, p. 124) that young adults cannot confront difficulties in acclimatising to school if they do not own the “knowledge of language, others’ cultures and communication codes” required to navigate within the school environment.

### **5.8.3 Acculturation**

The participants shared another common characteristic: their ethnic culture was at odds with the culture of the host society. They felt that the behaviour exhibited by South African learners in school directly contradicted the way they had been taught to behave at school in their native countries. Successful cultural adjustment occurs when immigrants can understand or integrate with the culture of the host society (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Berry et. al., 2006). It was found that most participants in this study displayed poor cultural adjustment to the culture of their host country and none of them could define themselves as South African. This is because many of the participants could not acclimatise to certain behaviours exhibited by South African learners at public schools, such as gambling, showing disrespect towards educators, dressing immodestly and bullying. However, many participants mentioned that they really like and respect their teachers and the school. Gibson and Carrasco (2009, p. 254) argue that:

Although official school discourses appear to embrace cultural and linguistic diversity, foreign-born and native-born children of immigrants often end up feeling silenced and alienated.

This is consistent with the findings of this study. Learners who felt isolated said that the school and the educators were welcoming and accepting of cultural diversity. However, South African learners have prejudices taught to them by their parents and

the community at large that lead to bullying, harassment and discrimination against immigrant learners.

#### **5.8.4 Resilience**

All six learners shared a common goal of wanting to achieve good grades at school so that they could go on to be successful. However, not all were able to achieve this, for various reasons. This is congruent with Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory (1998), as the high-achieving participants displayed high levels of resilience, which enabled them to confront and overcome the numerous challenges they faced at school. The low-achieving participants displayed pessimistic thinking patterns, low resilience levels and a low self-concept. These findings lead me to conclude that in this study, positive thinking patterns and high resilience levels contributed towards the high levels of academic achievement of the high-achieving learners.

#### **5.8.5 Cultural ecological theory**

CET's principal claim is that individuals' actions and thoughts are steered by their understandings of the societies they inhabit and their functions within these societies. These understandings are in turn greatly dependent on the manner in which the "minority groups have been incorporated into their various societies" (Ogbu, 1991, p. 8). The presence of these immigrant learners in South Africa is a consequence of oppressive forces, such as "slavery, conquest, or colonization" (Ogbu, 1991, p. 9), that encouraged or forced their families to move to South Africa and remain here. Ogbu argues that involuntary immigrant students tend to be cynical and suspicious of schools because they believe that schools seek to destroy their cultural values and identities, and do not offer them the same opportunities as the native learners. As a result, involuntary immigrant students can develop an oppositional stance that rejects the behaviours, characteristics and values of the dominant society, and, as a consequence, the school system too.

In this study this was found to be true because the involuntary immigrants were

opposed to South African customs. Martin, for example, said, “I don’t like the way they do things.” These learners also felt helpless and had no desire to excel in society. Victor expressed a longing to go back to the DRC to be with his mother, and Martin felt that he was “better off in Congo”. Belinda epitomised the oppositional stance when she said: “I am not like them, and they are not like me. We only share a country, not beliefs.” These involuntary immigrants seemed to oppose and reject South African society in response to the way South African society had rejected them.

Certain findings were partially inconsistent with cultural ecological theory. Learners who are voluntary immigrants showed excellent academic achievement; however, there was also a single involuntary immigrant who performed extremely well academically. Furthermore, there were some ways in which this study supported criticisms that CET is too reliant on community forces at the expense of system forces (Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Foster, 2004; Hamann, 2004), which are also capable of influencing the academic achievements of immigrant students in South Africa. As mentioned in Chapter Three, community forces deal with how immigrant students perceive and behave in response to schooling because of the way they are regarded, accepted or not accepted into their environment. System forces, as outlined in Chapter Three, deal with how immigrant students are perceived, handled or mishandled by policies pertaining to education, teaching and learning, and how they are rewarded for academic excellence. In this study, community forces were focused on more extensively than system forces, because Ogbu and Simon’s theory (1998) is more dependent on community forces than system forces. However, in retrospect, system forces need to play a bigger role in deconstructing CET and analysing immigrant learners’ responses to their environment.

Therefore, it is argued that analysing a combination of community forces and system forces is vital when determining the academic achievement of immigrant students in the South African schooling context. This researcher agrees with Hamann’s (2004) criticism that CET, as formulated by Ogbu (1990, 1991), is not incorrect or superfluous, but rather should be understood as being devoid of subjectivity. In this study, acts of exclusion by society as well as by native learners, language difficulties, and other forms of discrimination, bullying and acts of prejudice were found to be

likely sources of the low academic achievement among the low-achieving immigrant students of the study.

In Chapter Six, the limitations of the study are discussed, the significance of the study is outlined and recommendations for further research are suggested.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

#### 6.1 Introduction

When I began this study, the mystery I identified was that immigrant learners seemed to either flourish or fail miserably in the South African secondary school environment. The question I wanted to explore was: why is this so? Most of the immigrant learners that I encountered had travelled from former French colonies. Their sole intention was to join mainstream classrooms in South Africa and, eventually, create a better life for themselves. These immigrants spoke their indigenous languages at home, such as Lingala and French from Burundi and the DRC respectively. A factor I identified as being critical was the hostility that was reported against immigrants in South Africa. I wanted to understand how these learners coped with such antagonistic attitudes and how, in spite of the enmity, some managed to achieve great academic success. I was motivated to explore their schooling experiences and compare them with their academic achievement, an area that has not been previously explored in much detail in the secondary school environment.

Now, as I come to the end of this research and write the final chapter of the dissertation, I look back at where it all started. I recognise that teaching in South African classrooms with immigrant learners is complex and deeply situated within many cultural beliefs and multifaceted social practices, both those of the learners' home countries as well as those of the host society. In this closing chapter, I will furnish the reader with an overview of the voyage undertaken to produce this dissertation, provide an overview of the findings and discuss the contribution this study has made. The significance of the study is also presented and then the chapter closes by discussing some of the limitations of the research.



## **6.2 An overview of the journey**

### **6.2.1 Chapter One**

In Chapter One I presented the rationale for this study. Scrutiny of local and international studies revealed a gap in the research on the academic experiences of immigrant children in South Africa, and what influence this has on their academic performance, especially at the secondary school level. Information acquired from the literature provided a basis for exploring this area of research as it applies to the South African context. I explained the basic concepts “migration”, “academic experiences” and “xenophobia”. I also presented the research question, the objectives for the study and provided the reader with a preview of what was to come in the following chapters.

### **6.2.2 Chapter Two**

In Chapter Two, a survey of the existing literature revealed the multiple issues plaguing immigrant learners. European and American literature indicates that immigrant learners across the globe have been victimised due to ethnic and cultural differences, as well as linguistic difficulties. The issues surrounding immigrants in South Africa were also presented after an examination of the existing studies conducted locally. These issues reveal that immigrants are seen as unwelcome by some South African citizens. Black African immigrant learners have been harassed, insulted and bullied due to their accents and inability to speak the native language for many years. In this chapter I also explained that migration to South Africa is not a new phenomenon; however, in the past, black people were not legally recognised as immigrants. The post-1994 South Africa was designed to transform the legal framework and take South Africa into a new, democratic and more diverse future in which there would be a more equitable delivery of educational opportunities and access to skills that would ensure that black immigrants have a future in South Africa.

Immigrants who have moved to South Africa are immersed in the South African culture. As a result of this, schoolgoing children are found in multilingual classrooms where the language of instruction is English, especially in KwaZulu-Natal. The

immigrant learners who this study focused on are black African immigrant learners of the same race as the majority of the learners in their school. In the past, race defined power in South Africa. Today, language plays an equal role. The immigrants are immersed in an atmosphere where the majority of learners learn in a second language. In this context, nine out of the eleven official languages are not given the same status as English or Afrikaans. So as immigrants cross borders, they bring diverse languages that make the situation even more multifaceted. Immigrant learners are often forced into mandatory silence, as they can neither be interpreted nor understood by their native compatriots. Teaching immigrant learners is a complex matter, due to the fact that most South African teachers are not fluent in the immigrant learners' home languages and learners can therefore not use them when interacting with their teachers.

### **6.2.3 Chapter Three**

Chapter Three furnished the reader with detailed insight into the theories used to guide the research questions. The first theory utilised was cultural ecological theory as formulated by Ogbu (1978). Immigrants were split into three categories: autonomous minorities; involuntary minorities; and voluntary minorities, who consist of groups who have emigrated "more or less voluntarily to their host or new society for economic, social, or political reasons" (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1985, p. 87). Ogbu's dual frame of reference was explained as a way of framing and understanding how immigrants perceive their way of life in their new society and compare it with what their life would have been like had they stayed behind in their countries of origin. Voluntary immigrants often view their host society with a positive dual frame of reference, while involuntary immigrants tend to believe that their lives in their home countries would have been better had they remained behind in their home countries. This negative assessment develops because of an oppositional stance that involuntary immigrants cultivate, whereby they view their new society with hostility and reject the customs, culture and values of the host society.

#### **6.2.4 Chapter Four**

In Chapter Four the qualitative methodology used was expanded upon and its suitability for this study was outlined. The process of gaining access to immigrant learners was discussed and it was mentioned that it is a process that depends on a negotiation with certain gatekeepers, i.e. the principal of the school, and the Department of Education. I outlined how the relationship of trust established between the researcher and the participant is vital, especially due to the young age of the participants. In this chapter, the school environment where the data was collected was introduced and discussed in terms of the social and cultural background of the learners. This context showed that the home languages of the immigrant learners are not indigenous to South Africa. Most of these learners speak languages like French, Lingala, Kirundi or Swahili at home.

#### **6.2.5 Chapter Five**

In Chapter Five the focus of the study shifted to understanding the immigrant learners' academic experiences. The interviews were summarised using a narrative inquiry method and a brief life story about each participant was presented in the form of a narrative. I asked each learner about the context of how their learning took place in school, and about the experiences that were enabling them to progress or that were holding them back. Background information about each participant was used in order to gauge whether they were voluntary or involuntary immigrants. Each learner gave me sufficient information about their life experiences as well as their experiences within and outside of the classroom. Using theoretical resources derived mainly from Ogbu's cultural ecological theory (1998) and Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory (2001), I was able to offer an in-depth analysis and interpretation of how immigrant learners in South Africa are able to achieve academic competence and how they experience school. The analysis provided an insight into how immigrant learners are hindered by linguistic setbacks, xenophobic attitudes, bullying, harassment and cultural differences.

### **6.3 Review of the purpose and key questions**

Yamauchi (2004) suggests that with the South African education system just emerging from apartheid, the multitude of challenges teachers are facing in the classroom are being compounded as immigrants enter the classroom with their many languages and cultures. It is therefore vital that studies be conducted on how immigrant children adjust and adapt in the classroom, what sort of help is given to them, and the impact of this on their academic achievements. As a result, the study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the academic experiences of immigrant learners at school?
- How do immigrant learners experience academic achievement at high school?
- Why do they experience academic achievement in the way that they do?

At present, there is insufficient research that addresses the important issue of how immigrant “children are educated in their new country” (Sookrajh et al., 2005, p. 2). Furthermore, there is little research in South Africa on what challenges immigrant children confront in high school and how these influence their academic achievement. In this study, attempting to answer these research questions has allowed for a broader understanding of what immigrant adolescents face as they navigate their way through a South African high school. It extended an invitation to these learners to speak about their attitudes towards school, their grades and their ambitions for the future. All of this is entwined with background information about their families, their language and social and cultural difficulties, and their views on education in South Africa as compared with their home country.

Rodriguez (2009, p. 18) maintains that educators are seldom ready to deal with the challenges of addressing the complex issues and experiences brought by their learners from “multiple places, cultures, and languages”. Rodriguez’s claim is especially true for South African educators, who are struggling to contend with issues of race, culture, discipline and identity from native as well as immigrant learners. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to gain insight into the experiences of immigrant

children in secondary school, and the influence of their experiences on their academic performance and how they adapt to the South African school community.

**Table 1. Summary of emerging themes and categories in relation to the literature**

| <b>Themes</b>         | <b>Author and year</b>                             | <b>Existing knowledge</b>   | <b>Deductions from the study</b>  |
|-----------------------|--|---|---|
| Language as a barrier | Yeh et al. (2008)                                  | The understanding of English is crucial to academic success.  | Learners in this study who were found to be more proficient in English performed better at school.  |
|                       | Gupta (2009)                                       | Language is a crucial tool for interaction, both in the classroom and on the playground.                                | Learners needed to acquire skills in the native language in order to be socially accepted by South African learners.  |
| A sense of belonging  | Osterman (2000)                                    | Isolation and a sense of not belonging to the peer group is a major contributor to negative academic achievement.       | Two learners who feel isolated at school performed poorly; however, the other learners who have fulfilling social lives were high academic achievers.                   |
|                       | Wenger (1998)                                      | A sense of belonging indicates the extent of attachment to the school, and learning happens as a result of this.        | Learners who were accepted into social groups felt more positive about school and performed better.   |
| Acculturation         | LaFromboise, Coleman & Gerton (1993); Berry (1997) | Successful cultural adjustment occurs when immigrants can understand or integrate with the culture of the host society. | All immigrant learners have struggled to come to terms with the conflicting values, disrespectful behaviour and inappropriate dress of native learners in South Africa. |

## **6.4 Interpretation of emerging themes from the study**

This study was conducted by probing a body of literature, which proved crucial for forming the basis of the analysis and discussion of findings. The analysis of data and discussion of findings in this study were presented in relation to the existing literature, as comprehensively discussed in Chapter Five. Table 1 provides a summary of findings from the study in relation to the literature consulted. The 'theme' column provides the themes that emerged from the data analysis and are relevant to answering the research questions. An overview of the findings follows.

### **6.4.1 Language as a barrier**

Findings from this study illustrate that language was a key challenge for all black immigrant students. It was identified both from the literature (Yeh et al., 2008; Gupta, 2009) as well as from observation of the immigrant learners, that language played a highly significant role in their academic and social marginalisation, both inside and outside of the classroom. Black Francophone immigrant students were put at a disadvantage because they crossed over the border lacking competence in both English and indigenous South African languages. This lack of knowledge in the languages spoken in the school environment resulted in learning difficulties, harassment and isolation from other learners, as well as the school system as a whole. As Adebajji (2010, p. 134) argues, proficiency in the language of learning and teaching is an important academic feature that is essential to fortify for immigrant children in academic institutions that have chosen English as the language of instruction.

All learners acknowledged that learning English was the only way in which they could improve their school marks and a few participants mentioned that teachers discriminated against them if they could not speak English. It was discovered that many immigrant learners formed social relationships with learners from other African countries and these learners helped each other to comprehend schoolwork in their native languages.

During break times, black South African learners used their home language (isiZulu) almost exclusively and this entrenched the social exclusion experienced by the immigrant learners. As Belinda wrote in her diary,

I learn Zulu because I want to know (how) to speak with other people and sometimes during break I know some South African children are speaking about me, but I don't understand, so then I will be able to know what they are saying. I want to have friends in school.

As part of the linguistic challenges faced by immigrant learners, accent was a clear way of revealing oneself as an immigrant and this added to academic and social rejection. Victor's recollection of an incident when learners in the class mocked his pronunciation during his English speech is a clear indicator of this.

#### **6.4.2 Sense of belonging**

As outlined in earlier chapters, Asanova (2005) suggested that a sense of belonging allows learners to engage with the curriculum of study at their schools (provided they are proficient in the language of instruction). This study confirmed this to be true. Learners who felt socially excluded displayed poor academic performance and learners who felt that they were welcome in social groups that included South African learners performed at a higher level. Although no learners were currently experiencing discrimination at the secondary school level, they had all experienced prejudice or bullying at one time during their stay in South Africa.

For some of the learners, like Amanda, Delilah and Noleen, the absence of discrimination likely gave them the freedom to acquire a sense of belonging to the school and therefore influenced their excellent academic achievement. With other learners, such as Victor and Belinda, they isolated themselves either as a result of the discrimination they experienced earlier in life or simply because they did not like the way South African learners behaved. Even though both of them were trying to fit in and belong, they felt helpless, and this was reflected in their poor academic performance. These learners' experiences seem to confirm the arguments of Lave and

Wenger (1991) and Osterman (2000), hence the conclusion of this study that interaction is important for academic integration.

### **6.4.3 Acculturation**

Berry (1997) and LaFromboise, Coleman and Gerton (1993) have both suggested that one of the most significant changes immigrant adolescents have to undergo is adjusting to a new culture that is at odds with their home culture. According to these studies, successful cultural adjustment occurs when immigrants can understand or integrate with the culture of the host society. When all participants were questioned about whether they felt South African, the firm response from all was, “No”. They maintained that they could not identify with or accept South African culture as their own. They found things like promiscuous behaviour, ill-discipline, wearing revealing clothing and disrespect for elders to be at odds with the culture they had been brought up with by their parents. All participants maintained that South African learners conduct themselves unsuitably for their age and engage in activities that they could not condone. Examples of these activities included smoking, gambling, underage drinking, wearing revealing clothing and teenage sexual activity. The moral degeneration of indigenous learners was discussed at length with each participant and they were all vehement about not wanting to be a part of South African culture or behaviour.

Participants like Victor and Belinda who did not perform well in school still displayed a willingness to try, and also showed disdain for the behaviour of South African learners, with Belinda mentioning that such behaviour by others hinders the progress of her learning. Other participants like Amanda and Delilah said that they could not afford to get distracted by such things and were steadfast in their powerful work ethic and high levels of commitment. It was clear to me that they wanted, against all odds, to make things work for themselves in this country. The behaviour and activities of South African learners were at odds with the culture of the immigrant learners and served as a direct contradiction to the sound values and strong moral fibre that the immigrant learners brought with them from their home countries.



#### **6.4.4 Theoretical orientation**

I also weaved the theoretical orientation into the findings of the study. The findings were consistent with Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory (1998), which states that learners who possess a wide variety of positive emotional resources and optimistic thinking are high achievers. This proved to hold true in the cases of Amanda, Noleen and Delilah. These were emotionally stable, resilient learners who managed to continuously motivate themselves in spite of setbacks. The findings from these learners were also consistent with cultural ecological theory (Ogbu, 1991). The learners were voluntary immigrants, i.e. they were not forced to flee their home countries and were willing to migrate to their new country. CET advocates that voluntary immigrants are able to integrate successfully into the host country, display a strong work ethic, value and strive for academic merit, and are committed to their academic learning, making them high achievers in the school environment.

Conversely, involuntary immigrants develop an oppositional stance that rejects the behaviours, culture and values of the dominant society. This leads them to isolate themselves from others, especially those native to the host society. We could clearly see this behaviour being demonstrated by Victor, Belinda and Martin, who were identified as involuntary immigrants because their families did not intend to move to South Africa but were forced to leave their home countries due to unrest and difficulties (or in Martin's case, his father's calling from God). A discrepancy occurred when I discovered that Martin, despite being an involuntary immigrant, managed to excel at school, unlike the other involuntary immigrants who were both producing dismal results. I was forced to consider that while Martin personally did not want to move, his family's decision was voluntary in the sense that they were following a spiritual directive. This perhaps gave meaning, agency and direction to the hardship for them, as opposed to the other two involuntary immigrants where there was a general sense of helplessness and negativity. Hence, I can conclude that the findings were partially consistent with cultural ecological theory. Furthermore, the involuntary immigrants displayed a low level of resilience, and often allowed themselves to be demotivated by setbacks and pessimistic thinking patterns. Hence, it was concluded that low levels of resilience hinder academic progress and higher

levels of resilience encourage academic competence.

### **6.5 Methodological reflections**

This has been a pleasant journey for me that I enjoyed because I had good support from my supervisor as well as the school that served as the research site. The research drew on Rosenthal and Fischer-Rosenthal's (2004) method of analysis of narrative data. As I briefly reflect on this approach, I realise that while it is productive in terms of enabling thick and rich descriptions to be produced, and therefore ensures theoretical validity, it was a combination of the narrative and the analytical descriptions that contributed to the results of this dissertation. As I reflect, I realise that the methodology and the analytic tools can be tailored and refined so as to appropriately address the research questions. What has also emerged from this study, though, is that a methodological and analytical style is no simple matter because themes and narratives are not easily communicated, making them at times difficult to identify. It is important to put the necessary language in place in order to report on the experiences.

### **6.6 Discussion of limitations during the study**

This study, while providing rich and thick descriptions, cannot be generalised to other contexts — all that it can do is provide accounts of the lives of certain immigrant learners through their narratives. A number of factors that could limit the study have been identified.

Firstly, a longer time period to conduct the interviews would have given me the opportunity to gather more information pertinent to the study, especially during the interview sessions, which were only conducted twice. This was due to the limitations created by normal school interruptions, such as meetings, extra-curricular activities and learner absenteeism. A second focus group would have elicited further insight into the educational and academic experiences of immigrant students at the school.

Secondly, during the research planning period, the learners to be observed were informed. This prior knowledge could have affected the study because there was the likelihood of learners being conscious of the observation and thus, they did not behave as they naturally would have. Consequently, I may not have learned the true situation of events at the research site.

Thirdly, because the study concentrated on learners in grades 8 to 10, the findings from the study may appear to be limited. A broader set of findings could have been extracted if learners from other grades had been involved.

### **6.7 Significance of the study**

This study provides insight into how immigrant learners have experienced learning and teaching in South Africa at a particular time in its history. Every one of us is immersed in narratives. Where we come from (our histories) and who we are in this tiered, racial, gendered, and class-based world (our locations) matter in what we say and do. Who we are shapes what we see.

Detailed knowledge of the educational and socio-cultural experiences of immigrant students in South African schools may provide educators, parents and other stakeholders with a better understanding of what these learners navigate and negotiate in the host society. When this is achieved, all stakeholders in the field of education could be better informed and better prepared for the undertaking of accommodating black immigrants into South African society — a historically disadvantaged and culturally diverse location.

Banks (2001) states that educators who lack a knowledge and understanding of multiculturalism in the classroom could negatively affect some students' level of integration in school. This is why a study such as this is vital. The results of this study can assist in equipping stakeholders with knowledge about the complications of intermixed cultures at schools. Rodriguez (2009) concurs that teachers are too often unprepared or unwilling to consider the academic needs of immigrant learners simply because the learners come from backgrounds that are foreign to them. From this it can

be deduced that teachers need to receive appropriate training so that they are able to better comprehend the requirements of immigrant students in the host society. When this is properly done, it may reduce the lack of willingness on the part of teachers to recognise the complicated lives and complex connections their immigrant learners have to multiple places, cultures, and languages (Rodriguez, 2009, p. 18).

A primary issue that emerged in the study was the importance of language. The information gleaned from this study could influence policy makers to introduce special English classes for immigrant learners in South Africa. This would be especially beneficial to immigrant learners who did not attend primary school in South Africa.

The descriptions and understanding produced in this research may serve as a potential contribution to everyone's comprehension of immigrant learners' academic experiences in South African schools. The issues highlighted in this study, such as racism, xenophobia and bullying, which are common occurrences in South African schools, may also be tackled more effectively. Leyendecker and Lamb (1999) suggest that the successful integration of immigrant groups into the host society depends on the amount of discrimination experienced by the immigrant adolescents. By using the knowledge generated in this study, public schools can be better educated about the need to be sensitive about multiculturalism, by deterring discrimination towards immigrants and by engaging in curriculum and instructional strategies in a way that will foster tolerance and acceptance in the current diverse landscape of South Africa. This study offers an account of the academic experiences of immigrant students, with the hope of fostering tolerant attitudes on the part of black immigrants and indigenous students in a manner that may promote a harmonious co-existence.

### **6.8 Recommendations for further research**

A number of research topics have been identified for further study as a result of the experience gathered from this study. These are as follows:

- The effects of parental participation on the academic performance of immigrant learners.

- The socio-cultural experiences of immigrant learners at secondary schools.
- The impact of ethnic differences on immigrant learners' academic performance.
- The academic experiences of immigrant learners in primary schools.
- The influence of remedial English language classes on immigrant learners' academic performance at high schools.

## **6.9 Conclusions**

There is an impression that black immigrant learners integrate successfully into the South African school system because of their shared racial identity with the majority of South African learners. However, there are inherent conflicts involved in their integration into schools, which cause immigrant learners to continue to feel alienated from South African society.

This research study revealed certain similarities and differences with studies conducted elsewhere, as reflected in the literature review. Some of the similarities are that immigrant students in the South African context also have to contend with discrimination and harassment, but this is fundamentally in terms of intra-racial dynamics, which involve issues of language and acculturation. Immigrant students feel that schools do not take into account or address their cultural or linguistic background, and they feel a sense of alienation rather than one of belonging. Black immigrant students have distinctive stories to tell regarding the way in which their host country affects their life experiences. Yet, so far these stories have not been heard and have not had any significant impact on policies, curricula and instructional strategies.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX ONE

### INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. What is your name? In what town or city were you born? What country? How old were you when you first arrived in South Africa? What year was that?
2. Describe your homeland. What language do you speak there? How did your community differ from where you live today? What foods did you eat? Did people dress differently there than they do in South Africa? What do you miss about your homeland?
3. Why did you and your family leave your native country? Describe your trip to South Africa. What obstacles did you have to overcome? What experiences did you have?
4. Before you came, what did you think life in South Africa would be like? How do you think your life would be different in South Africa as compared to in your homeland?
5. When you started school in South Africa, what did you experience? Was it different from what you expected? Explain.
6. What kinds of challenges did you experience adjusting to life and culture in South Africa, especially at school? Did you have to learn English? Did you change your eating habits? Did you change the way you dress? Did you change the way you related to your family? Did you make any friends? Did you change the way you learn? Did you change your leisure activities?
7. What challenges has learning English created for you? Do your parents speak English? If not, has this created any communication problems? What language will your children speak? Do you think you will ever forget your native language? How does that make you feel?
8. Have you experienced any discrimination at school? If yes, have you ever had a similar problem in your homeland? How did the experience(s) in this country make you feel? What did you do to overcome prejudice?
9. How do you feel about your lessons? And about your teachers? Do you feel that they are helping you learn? What about the way learners behave in the classroom? How do you feel about that?

10. What do you believe it means to “be a South African”? Do you feel mostly South African now or something else? Do you believe a person can change his or her culture to fit into a country like South Africa? Do you believe a person can be “a South African” and still retain his or her culture? Explain.

## APPENDIX TWO

### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. In the beginning of the video, there is a boy talking about what he sees in the movies. He talks about money and cars and how he wanted a life like that, which is why he came to America. Did you feel the same way when you came to South Africa?
2. The girl's name is Luincys. Luincys says that she felt both sad and excited when she left her home country. Did you feel the same way?
3. When she arrived, her first thought was that everything looked the same- tall and brown. What were your first impressions of South Africa?
4. Luincys talks about how the things she was wearing were so out of fashion and that people could see she was a newcomer. Have you ever felt the same way? What did you do?
5. She says she felt sad when she was going to school because she was not understanding anything. She says she felt like she was getting smaller and smaller while the world got bigger and bigger. She says, " I felt frustrated because I wanted to do good but I couldn't". Let's talk about other feelings you had when you realised that you could not speak Zulu/English or manage with any work in class.
6. She mentions that she never heard the terms prejudice/stereotype/discrimination in her home country. Was it the same for you?
7. She talks about how people think everyone from her country is a drug dealer. What stereotypes have you heard about people from your country?
8. Luincys mentions the support of her family often. Do you think you could achieve academic success without your family here? How important is your family when overcoming prejudice.
9. She mentions that the peaceful side of herself is in her home country and the struggling side is with her in her new country. Does anyone feel the same way?
10. How would you feel if you had the opportunity to become a South African citizen?
11. Do you think your education in South Africa will help your home country?

**APPENDIX THREE**  
**LETTER TO THE PARENT**

School of Educational Psychology  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
(Edgewood Campus)

Dear Parent,

My name is Aneesa Mohamed (207507608). I am an educator at Burnwood Secondary School who is also studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Edgewood Campus toward my Master's degree. The title of my research is: **Scholastic experiences of immigrant learners at a school in Sydenham**. The aim of the study is to explore the experiences of high school learners from other countries. I am interested in your child's participation so as to share their experiences and observations on the subject matter.

Please note that:

- The information that they provide will be used for scholarly research only.
- Their participation is entirely voluntary. They have a choice to participate, not to participate or stop participating in the research. This will not affect any school work or contribute to the school curriculum.
- The learners' views in this study will be presented anonymously. Neither their name nor identity will be disclosed in any form.
- Their participation will take about one school term. Meetings will be held during the school breaks.
- The records as well as other items associated with this study will be held in a password-protected file accessible only to myself and my supervisors. After a period of five years, in line with the rules of the university, it will be disposed by shredding and burning.
- Learners will be interviewed and the interviews will be recorded by means of an audio recorder.
- If you agree to let your child participate, please sign the declaration attached to this statement.

I can be contacted via email: [mohamedaneesa@yahoo.com](mailto:mohamedaneesa@yahoo.com) or cell: 072 877 1550.



My supervisor is Dr. V. Jairam who is located at the School of Educational Psychology, Edgewood Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal. Contact details: email [jairam@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:jairam@ukzn.ac.za). Phone number: 031 260 1438.

The Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee contact details are as follows: Ms Phumelele Ximba, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Research Office, Email: [ximbap@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximbap@ukzn.ac.za). Phone number 031 260 3587.

Thank you for your contribution to this research.

**APPENDIX FOUR**  
**INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR THE PARENT**

**DECLARATION**

I..... (*full names of parent/guardian*),  
hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the  
research project, and I consent to ..... (*full names  
of learner*) participating in the research project.

I understand that my child/ward can withdraw from the project at any time, should  
I/they so desire.

**SIGNATURE OF PARENT/GUARDIAN**

.....

**DATE**

.....

## APPENDIX FIVE

### LETTER TO THE LEARNER

School of Educational Psychology  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
(Edgewood Campus)

Dear Participant,

My name is Aneesa Mohamed (207507608). I am Master's student studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Edgewood Campus. The title of my research is: **Scholastic experiences of immigrant learners at a school in Sydenham**. The aim of the study is to explore the experiences of high school learners from other countries. I am interested in your participation so as to share your experiences and observations on the subject matter.

Please note that:

- The information that you provide will be used for scholarly research only.
- Your participation is entirely voluntary. You have a choice to participate, not to participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalized for taking such an action.
- Your views in this interview will be presented anonymously. Neither your name nor identity will be disclosed in any form in the study.
- Your participation will take about 1 school term. We will meet once or twice a week.
- The records as well as other items associated with this study will be held in a password-protected file accessible only to myself and my supervisors. After a period of 5 years, in line with the rules of the university, it will be disposed by shredding and burning.
- If you are willing to be interviewed, please indicate (by ticking as applicable) whether or not you are willing to allow the interview to be recorded by the following equipment:

|                 | Willing | Not willing |
|-----------------|---------|-------------|
| Audio equipment |         |             |

If you agree to participate please sign the declaration attached to this statement.

I can be contacted via email: [mohamedaneesa@yahoo.com](mailto:mohamedaneesa@yahoo.com) or cell: 072 877 1550.

My supervisor is Dr. V. Jairam who is located at the School of Educational Psychology, Edgewood Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal. Contact details: Email: [jairam@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:jairam@ukzn.ac.za). Phone number: 031 260 1438.

The Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee contact details are as follows: Ms Phumelele Ximba, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Research Office, Email: [ximbap@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximbap@ukzn.ac.za). Phone number 031 260 3587.

Thank you for your contribution to this research.

**APPENDIX SIX**  
**INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR THE LEARNER**

**DECLARATION**

I ..... *(full names of participant)*  
hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the  
research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I  
so desire. I understand the intention of the research. I hereby agree to participate.

I consent / do not consent to have this interview recorded (if applicable).

**SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT**

.....

**DATE**

.....

## APPENDIX SEVEN

### GATEKEEPER PERMISSION FORM

**Re: Master's in Educational Psychology Research Project**

**Title of project:** The Academic Experiences of Immigrant learners at a Secondary School in Sydenham

**Investigator:** Aneesa Mohamed (Student number: 207507608)

**PERMISSION TO:** *Interview 6 immigrant learners in grades 8-10.*

The information provided will be used for scholarly research only. Note:

- Learners' participation is entirely voluntary. They have a choice to participate, not to participate or stop participating in the research. They will not be penalised for taking such an action.
- Their views in this interview will be presented anonymously. Neither their names nor identity will be disclosed in any form in the study.
- Their participation will take about 1 school term.
- The records as well as other items associated with this study will be held in a password-protected file accessible only to my supervisors and myself. After a period of 5 years, in line with the rules of the university, it will be disposed by shredding and burning.
- If learners are willing to be interviewed they can choose whether or not they are willing to allow the interview to be recorded.

As the principal at Burnwood Secondary School, I give my permission to the researcher to utilise this school as the site of research.

**Name of permission-giver:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of permission-giver:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:**     /     /

# APPENDIX EIGHT

## ETHICAL CLEARANCE



29 July 2014

Ms Aneesa Mohamed 207507608  
School of Education  
Edgewood Campus

Protocol reference number: HSS/0481/014M  
Project title: The academic experiences of immigrant learners at a school in Sydenham.

Dear Ms Mohamed

Full Approval – Expedited

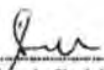
This letter serves to notify you that your application in connection with the above has now been granted full approval.

Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach/Methods must be reviewed and approved through an amendment /modification prior to its implementation. Please quote the above reference number for all queries relating to this study. Please note: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

The ethical clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 3 years from the date of issue. Thereafter Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully



Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)

/px

cc Supervisor: Dr V Jairam  
cc Academic Leader Research: Dr P Morojele  
cc School Administrator: Mr Thoba Mthembu

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)

Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

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Telephone: +27 (0) 31 260 3587/83804587 Facsimile: +27 (0) 31 260 4669 Email: [ximbo@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximbo@ukzn.ac.za) / [ethics@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ethics@ukzn.ac.za) / [mohun@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:mohun@ukzn.ac.za)

Website: [www.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.ukzn.ac.za)

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**APPENDIX NINE**  
**CONFIRMATION OF EDITING**

PO Box 100715  
Scottsville  
3209

20 June, 2015

To whom it may concern,

This letter serves to confirm that I have edited the following dissertation for language and expression, consistency, referencing errors and general layout and presentation:

Student: Ms Aneesa Mohamed

Student number: 207507608

Thesis title: The Scholastic Experiences of Immigrant Learners at a Secondary School in Sydenham.

Supervisor: Dr V. Jairam

Institution: School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal

Yours sincerely,

Debbie Turrell

081 303 0439

debbie.turrell@gmail.com