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Academic Achievement Gap: The Case of Children of Immigrants

by

Dukassa W. Lemu, B.Sc., A. S.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the
School of Social Work
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas
St. Paul, Minnesota
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

Committee Members

Research Chair: Karen T. Carlson, M.S.E., MSSW, Ph.D., LICSW

David McGraw Schuchman, MSW, LICSW

Teferi Fufa, B.Sc., M.Ed.

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University /University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the University Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

Academic Achievement Gap: The Case of Children of Immigrants By Dukassa W. Lemu

Research Chair: Karen T. Carlson, M.S.E., MSSW, PhD., LICSW

Committee members: David McGraw Schuchman, MSW, LICSW; Teferi Fufa, B.Sc., M.Ed.

The academic achievement gap among immigrant children is caused by multiple factors that require multiple strategies to alleviate the gap. The purpose of my study is to get the views and ideas of key interview participants to gain deep understanding of the factors that contribute to academic achievement gap among immigrant children. A qualitative research design was used in this research. The current qualitative research project employed a phenomenological approach (Lester, 1999), in interviewing participants who have personal knowledge and experiences of factors contributing to achievement gap. The four themes considered for the research were schools, neighborhoods, family and socioeconomic status (SES) factors. Eight interview participants quantified a number of contributing factors to the gap. The semi-structured interview conducted with eight interview participants highlighted the factors that hamper immigrant children's academic achievement. The findings in this research indicated the following conditions as major factors in the achievement gap among immigrant children: 1) School environment without bi-lingual and multi-cultural teachers, standardized tests without exception, age based placement and lack of role model teachers and school staff members 2) Poor neighborhoods with poor safety conditions and poor schools with poor academic outcomes 3) Low family socioeconomic status (SES), educational level, and school involvement; 4) Difficulties and challenges of integration into American school system because of lack of English skills that contribute to low comprehension of subject matters. In addition to the achievement gap problem, the fear of failing in school is found to be exposing immigrant children to mental and behavioral health problems that compromise the well-being of the children. The research findings showed that there are multiple factors that contribute to the gap. Therefore, intervention strategies based on research is recommended to alleviate the existing academic achievement gap and plan for the future to close the gap.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is my great pleasure to express my deepest thanks to my professor and committee chair, Dr. Karen T. Carlson, who helped and encouraged me during my extreme need and support in my 682 research project approval as well as its completion and final presentation. The kind of support I received from Dr. Carlson, energized me for success in this field of study. Thank you very much, Dr. Carlson.

My committee members, David Schuchman and Teferi Fufa, deserve so many thanks. They were tirelessly communicating with me whenever I asked. They are milestones for the success of my research project in providing me educational and moral support. Friends, your support and participation in my research project helped me to complete my research paper on time that enabled me to graduate successfully.

I would like to thank my clinical field supervisor, George Baboila, who continuously trained me to be a good counselor and therapist that is very important in my future career. George, your training and professional guidance will be a lesson I will keep and practice in my career. Thank you!

I would like to thank my great and deeply loved brother and friend, late Tesfaye F., whom I missed a lot. Your encouragement and brotherly advice is unforgettable. I miss you, rest in peace.

The St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas are deeply appreciated for their wonderful teaching and learning environment in the spirit of inclusion and diversity; this encouraged me to be successful in my education that I value in my life to serve and contribute to the wellbeing of my community.

Finally, it is my great pleasure to acknowledge my loving and supportive wife, Aster Amenu; without her support it was difficult to succeed. It is great to have someone who cares so much, Thank very much, Aster. Also, I would like to thank my son, Abdi Dukassa Wodajo, for his understanding of my time out of home, most of the times, for the last three years. My friends who encouraged and supported me during my stay in school are highly appreciated.

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Achievement Gap among Immigrant Children

Academic Achievement Gap: The Case of Children of immigrants

The challenges facing immigrants' children in academic achievement are multifaceted across grade levels. Mark (2013, p. 335), says "This gap, usually ... is evident through disparities in standardized test scores, grade point averages, graduation rates, drop-out rates, and college admission data (National Research Council, 2004)." The definition of the academic achievement gaps varies among social science researchers where schools are struggling to close the achievement gap. The long term effect of achievement gap among children of immigrants is reflected in college drop outs, low employment opportunity, low socioeconomic status where these factors have the potential to put the children in poverty over time; as a result, the academic achievement gap observed among immigrant children has long term implications for their future well-being.

Hao & Bonstead-Bruns (1998) say, "Research has shown that educational achievement predicts continuation in school and future educational attainment, which in turn, predicts future economic success" (1998, p. 176). Therefore, policy makers, educators, parents, public and private institutions and immigrant children are the main stakeholders who should dig into and bring to the surface those factors that contribute to the academic achievement gaps among immigrant children in particular. The participation of stakeholders will be very important to facilitate a common ground to improve the achievement of immigrant children through collaborative approach (Berg, 2001). The research project conducted and reported in this paper included only few of the contributing factors based on current problems in the community and

relevant literature reviews. The most important factor in understanding the implications of the achievement gap is the fact that future economic success is not attainable without present and future educational attainment (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998). Therefore, changing the status quo or keeping the status quo is the choice before the stakeholders. The success of immigrant children in education is the success of the society at large.

Some of the major themes in this achievement gap research among immigrant children, compared to native born children, are identified. Among these are family involvement (Aldous, 2006), school conditions (Filandra, Blanding & Coll, 2011), socio-economic status (SES) and individual factors (Ansalone, 2009), community and neighborhood conditions (Pong & Hao, 2007). These factors are only a few of the principal and important factors for academic achievement disparities among the children.

The United States has special interest in immigrant families who are coming with their children, because these children will be part of this country's future labor force, voters in elections (Aldous, 2006, p. 1633), will serve in the armed forces to protect the country, and participate in all aspects of the country's development. Aldous (2006, p. 1634), in the *Journal of Family Issues* indicated that parents' interactions and involvement with their children's performance and their aspirations for them positively influence the academic achievement of the children. Kao (2004, p. 248), stated that parents' immigration status mattered more than children's immigration status in determining children's educational outcome, especially those of first generation immigrant children. Socioeconomic status (SES) of families in which immigrant children are born has an impact on the academic achievement of the children (Ansalone, 2009). The "faucet theory" (cited in, Ansalone 2009, p. 74), says that "when schools

are not in session (the summer months), disadvantaged children stop learning! On the other hand, the curve for advantaged children may be more consistent and continue during these periods.”

The faucet theory explains that better economic standards of family plays a great role in the academic growth of children and will help in alleviating the achievement gap. The differences in the SES is one of the structural factors of wealth inequality in the country. Immigrant children’s academic performance is lagging behind in part because of the low economic condition of parents; it is likely that these children are victims of inequality in school performance that follows them in their later life in low employment opportunities and low job performances; this may result from low academic performance as compared to their native born peers who are born with advantages, including higher SES.

Pong & Hao (2007) studied the profound effects of neighborhood and school factors, community and structural factors respectively. Pong and Hao stated that the neighborhood and school factors are not universal but they influence the performance of immigrant children more than that of native children. The academic achievement gap between immigrant student groups and native born groups is thought to be partially the result of the social conditions in which these groups are embedded (2007). The social contexts considered in these conditions are family, school, and neighborhood. From the family perspective point of view, socioeconomic status, parental language, length of residence in the United States, family structure, and parental support and involvement (Ansalone, 2009, p. 93) are stated as influential factors in immigrant children’s school performance. Each factor will be described in the literature review of the paper.

The neighborhood and school contexts influencing immigrant children's academic achievement are explained in theoretical perspectives and methodological advances. It is common sense that immigrants are settling more frequently in disadvantaged neighborhoods with poor performing schools and low economic status. The neighborhood disadvantages discussion is rooted in the social disorganization theory or epidemic theory while the advantages of living in a high status neighborhoods follows a social capital theory that is rooted in the idea of wealth accumulation or concentration (Pong & Hao, 2007, p. 208). The neighborhood effects on an individual immigrant child are explained in Comprehensive Theoretical Framework proposed by Jenks and Mayer (1999) as discussed in the same article by Pong and Hao (p.208). This framework has five models: epidemic, collective socialization, institution, competition, and deprivation; each of these models will be described in detail later in the literature review.

Waters & Ueda (2007) critically examined the backgrounds of immigrants entering the United States with their children with diverse cultural, linguistic and racial differences that will increase trends of diversity at large. Some immigrant children are coming to this country from educated professional parents. On the other hand, some children are coming from illiterate and low skilled parents, and parents who are struggling to survive in low paid service jobs; children who are embedded in such family conditions are prone to low academic achievement that contributes to academic performance differences between immigrant children and native born children (Waters & Ueda, 2007, p. 241).

Orozco, Rhodes, & Milburn (2009), complement the findings of Waters and Ueda (2007) on the highly diverse composition of immigrants and their children coming to the United States

with their culture of strong family ties, strong belief in education achievement and optimism about their future life in a new country. The declining of academic achievement and aspirations because of factors affecting academic engagement and disengagement among immigrant youth are discussed by Orozco et al. (2009, p. 151). Some of the challenges many immigrant children face to succeed in school in their new country are high levels of poverty, unwelcoming contexts of reception, and experience of discrimination, school and community violence (2009). These unfriendly conditions decrease the psychological functioning of students that result in low self-esteem and make them vulnerable to academic failure.

It is a paradox to find out the result of a Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study (LISA) that academic outcome of immigrant children is declining with their length of residence in the United States. “Paradoxically, despite an initial advantage, in nearly all immigrant groups today, length of residence in the United States is associated with declining academic achievement and aspirations” (Orozco et al. 2009, p. 153). For such serious indication, there should be evidence based research to substantiate the paradox and help to inform stakeholders.

The Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation (LISA) study in New York showed discouraging conditions that immigrant children are facing in school environments. “The children of immigrants are discouraged by the insensitivity and sometimes out right discrimination that they encounter from teachers, counselors and other school personnel and that they seem to benefit from the presence of mentors and non-parental adults who show concern about their education” (Holdaway & Alba, 2009, p.608). Further research is required to complement these underlying critical issues to take collaborative action against such practices.

Tienda & Haskins (2011) say that most social indicators reveal that children with immigrant parents perform less well than their native born counterparts and are more likely to live in poverty, drop out of school and show problem behavior; these factors, in combination with parents' low English language skills, place the majority of immigrant children at risk of poor scholastic outcomes (p. 4). The involvement of parents is directly related to academic achievement. "Parental involvement refers to the role parents play in the education of their children" (Ansalone, 2009, p. 93). Academic achievement disparity is also conspicuous among migrant children who move with their parents from season to season in search of agricultural work (Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009). Gibson and Hidalgo clearly stated that children of migrant farmworkers are at greater risk of dropping out of school and are the most disadvantaged children of immigrants in the United States (Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009, p. 683).

Feliciano (2005) argues that immigrant families coming to a new country are diverse in their education and economic status that impacts educational outcomes of their children. Researchers formulated a different kind of theory to explain why some immigrant children follow an upward mobility path while many others remain in abject poverty. Segmented Assimilation Theory says that "individual factors, such as parents' human capital, as well as contextual factors, such as government reception, racial prejudices of the receiving society...and economic conditions interact to explain divergent outcomes"(p. 135). Feliciano states that unequal origin produces unequal outcomes; therefore, one of the problems of the academic performance gap among these children is the result of being uprooted from their original home country.

Literature Review

Mark (2013) argues that the achievement gap is part of the comprehensive gap persisting in the country in different social and economic sectors such as housing, language, SES, and other interrelated gaps that contribute to school performance disparity. According to Mark (2013), the academic achievement gap should be studied comprehensively with opportunity gaps (P.338) that include teacher quality, teacher training, school funding and integration; all of these factors contribute to achievement gaps.

The prevalence of academic achievement gap among immigrant children is of particular interest to social science and educational researchers and policy makers, to identify the important factors that contribute to these compelling educational achievement differences. The researcher's interest is based on the fact that increasing number of immigrant children are entering American school system every year and the achievement gap is one of the important issues among these children that should be addressed to the public. Potocky-Tripodi (2002) discussed about a research study done on academic achievement of immigrant and refugee children due to the fact that their number is increasing in American schools. Potocky-Tripodi says, "Currently, children from immigrant families comprise 19 percent of all school children, and half the growth in school-age children in the next decade will be attributable to children from immigrant families" (p. 362). It should also be noted that "children of today's immigrants ... represent the most consequential and lasting legacy of the U.S.'s new mass immigration" (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002, p. 362). Therefore, getting deep understanding of the issues through

qualitative research will be one of the best ways to show the gap is actually affecting immigrant children.

There are a number of themes identified in the literature review to explain the academic achievement gap among immigrant children in this research project; they are family & socio-economic status (SES), school and neighborhood conditions. Each theme will be discussed and treated separately in the following subsequent narrative.

Themes

Family.

Parental influence and aspiration for student achievement play a great role in encouraging children to succeed in school. Stewart (1993) described that low levels of parental education and low levels of English language proficiency limited parents' ability to support their children in academic field and exposed the children to high dropout trajectory. "Good performance in school is directly related to the assistance that parents can give to children, and academic assistance is something that many ... parents cannot provide" (Stewart, p. 181). The parents' inability to assist their children in academic success is also supported by other social science researchers such as Fuligni (1997) who says, immigrant children face many challenges that are barriers to success; most of them are related to their families' circumstances. Some of the factors indicated are low English language skills, settlement of immigrant families in troubled neighborhoods, arrival from war torn countries without resources, and lack of knowledge to navigate American school systems (Fuligni, 1997, p. 351).

There is a Spanish saying that has slowly been gaining currency with educators of English-language learners (ELL): *Lo que se aprende en la cuna, siempre dura*. That which is learned in the crib lasts forever. Few programs embrace that concept more strongly than AVANCE, a nonprofit organization founded in San Antonio, Texas, in 1973 to prepare poor and primarily Latino kids for academic success by focusing on their earliest and most influential teachers, which are parents (Sadowski, 2004, p.95). The involvement of parents in their children's education is highly influential and is a power that moves children across age groups to do better in schools even under language and economic barriers (Fuligni, 1997, p. 351).

Stewart (1993, p. 180), emphasized the importance of parental influence on immigrant children academic performance. The two main factors contributing to high school dropouts of Mexican students in California were found to be low levels of education and lack of English proficiency of parents (Stewart, 1993). Furthermore, Stewart (1993) indicated that, generally, students' academic performance is directly related to parental assistance that many children of immigrants are not provided with because of low educational level of their parents; as a result, high rate of school dropouts and low school performance are inevitable. Children in immigrant families are role changing by supporting their families in English language translation; this consumes the children's study time (Tseng, 2004 & Stewart, 1993, p. 181). This is a huge responsibility that these children should have not involved in normal conditions where the impact on academic success is inevitable.

Socioeconomic Status.

There are a wide range of variables used as indicators of socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status is commonly conceptualized as the social standing or class of an individual or group (<http://apa.org/topics/socioeconomic-status/index.aspx>). In this research project, the inclusion of SES as one of the determining factors in academic achievement is to reveal inequalities in access to resources as wells as issues related to privilege, power, and control (<http://apa.org/topics/socioeconomic-status/index.aspx>). Immigrant groups don't generally access to privilege, power or control and lack the capacity to support their children. Glick & Marriott (2007) discussed the role of family resources and parental education on enhancement of children's academic success. The availability of family resources and social capital increases and encourages the support that children need such as better and high achieving schools, text books, access to library, summer school programs, computers, tutors, and additional enrollment in academic and artistic programs (2007).

Immigrant parents have less access to social and economic capital when compared to native born parents. These differences have major impacts on the early life of children where parents can't be in a position to support their children. Sadowski (2007) said that parents are the earliest and most influential teachers for their children before they are engaged in schools, but lack of access to resources and early social environment inhibit this fundamental support to immigrant children (Glick & Marriott, 2007).

Students' academic achievement is strongly associated with social class of families to which a child is born (Ansalone, 2009). The income gap between native born Americans and immigrants is very large, especially for newly arrived immigrants in the United States (Waters & Ueda, 2007). The household income of 1990s immigrants is less than \$15,000 per year for

23.4% of immigrants, compared to 16.3% for US-born population (Waters & Ueda, 2007, p.186). Therefore, an immigrant family with low socioeconomic status is less likely to be able to provide needed support to children born in these households, depriving the children of financial support needed to succeed in schools.

Neighborhood and School Factors.

School and neighborhood effects on academic performance of immigrant children are not universal. However, these two factors influence school performance of immigrant children more severely than of American born children (Pong & Hao, 2007). Pong and Hao used a cross-classified hierarchical models (2007, p. 206) to reveal the influence of school and neighborhood on school performance of immigrant children as compared to non-Hispanic white children. The investigative research made on adolescents by the researchers is influenced by the fact that this life course stage (p. 207) is a stage in which children are susceptible to life conditions and influences of environmental factors outside home or residential area.

Neighborhood and schools are viewed as the most prominent ecological factors that influence academic outcomes. The conceptual framework that explains the effects of neighborhood and schools is the Social-Ecological Framework as stated below:

An ecological framework proposes that the human experience is a result of reciprocal interactions between individuals, his or her contexts and culture, and over time (<http://apa.org/topics/immigration/executive-summary.pdf>).

The researcher will analyze theoretical considerations used by Pong and Hao (2007, p. 207), to show how neighborhood and school factors affect educational outcome of immigrant

children. The neighborhood disadvantages for immigrant children are often conceptualized in social disorganization theory (Pong & Hao, 2007). The effects of neighborhood on individual is evaluated through a comprehensive theoretical framework advanced by Jencks and Mayer (1990) as discussed by Pong and Hao. These two researchers utilized the proposed five conceptualized theoretical models adopted for further explanation of the neighborhood, school and community factors that contribute to academic achievement gap. The 5 models are presented below.

Neighborhood Factors.

Epidemic Model.

The epidemic model explanation entails the social disorganization theory that emphasizes on the normative characteristics held by peers in the neighborhood. The peer influence in the neighborhood is assumed to have negative impacts on children associating with each other that results in opposition to values held by parents and society at large (Pong & Hao, 2007, citing Coleman, 1961). Especially in schools, peer pressure to be engaged with anti-social groups who may use drugs or controlled substances is immense for immigrant children who may be coerced to criminal activities rather than school adherence, resulting in academic failure (Pong & Hao, 2007). It is a common sense to understand that children in adolescence life stage will be attracted to their peers instead of staying with their parents. Therefore, they are prone to peer pressure and less likely to succeed in schools. Immigrant children usually form their own peer groups who speak the same language with limited English proficiency and miss the opportunity to advance in English skills that may affect their school performance (2007). In this model, it should be understood that the influence of young people on academic achievement is

emphasized as peer pressure which changes each other's behavior to be deviant or show socially unacceptable behavior that influences children's school performance (Pong & Hao, 2007).

Collective Socialization Model.

The collective socialization model (Pong & Hao, 2007) focuses on the adults living and working in neighborhood who could be good role-models for the growing young generation in that community. The presence of successful adults in education, economic status and social status, especially, immigrant adults in the neighborhood, will get the attention of immigrant children in the area to follow similar path in their future endeavor. Successful socialization will take place when sufficient numbers of positive model adults are present in the neighborhood as discussed in Pong & Hao's article (2007, p. 209). "Peer support has been shown to moderate neighborhood effects on antisocial behavior, substance use, and school achievement" (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000, p. 327). The peer support initiatives are possible with the presence of economically well to do neighborhoods and influential change agents. Furthermore, Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2003, P. 28), affirmed that pre-school and school age children's school achievement, verbal ability, and IQ scores are positively associated with the presence of affluent neighborhoods.

Children living in neighborhoods with low-SES are found to be exposed to mental health problems that directly affect their academic achievement (Leventhan & Brooks-Gunn, 2003, p. 28-29) when immigrant children are particularly embedded in such economically low functioning residential areas. One of the theoretical models of neighborhood effects proposed by Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2003), norms and collective efficacy, hypothesizes that

“neighborhood influences are accounted for by the extent of formal and informal institutions in the community...” (p. 29). This model identifies peer pressure and physical threats such as violence and availability of illegal and harmful substances that are prevalent in poor neighborhoods where immigrant children are residing.

The Collective Socialization Model explains characteristics of immigrant neighborhood adults’ foreign language status and their ability to mobilize capital, particularly social capital that encourages immigrant children’s goals and aspirations to succeed in schools. Local immigrant community organizations in Minnesota such as Oromo Sport Federation of North America (OSFNA, <http://www.osfna.org/>, 2014) brought hundreds of young first and second generation immigrant Oromo youth across the United States and helped them to get organized, to overcome challenges that they may face in their new country, when it comes to education issues. “Adolescents may feel comfortable becoming friends with those who share their culture and thus seek co-ethnic peers in the neighborhood (Pong and Hao, 2007). It will be important to understand that such kinds of social cohesion will foster social capital such as co-ethnic friendship that may influence academic success.

Relative Deprivation and Competition Model.

The comprehensive theoretical framework models link neighborhood and community characteristics to individual residents’ behavior (Pong & Hao, 2007, Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). The relative deprivation model assumes that people judge themselves in comparison to the people living around them (Pong & Hao, 2007). Immigrant children from poor families may attend the same school with affluent children in their same neighborhood. It is most likely that

these children feel inferior and may develop low self-esteem that results in low school performance.

The competition model depicts that there is a likely scenario that competition for scarce resources in the neighborhood disproportionately affect immigrant children living in the same community with well to do children of rich families. On the other hand, the competition model has a likely scenario of encouraging immigrant children to be competitive in believing in the “American Dream” of meritocracy that focuses on talent rather than class status (Pong &Hao, 2007, p. 211).

Institutional Model.

Jenks and Mayer (1990), as discussed by Pong and Hao, suggested that different institutions such as police force, community services, and public and private organizations in the neighborhood affect academic performance of children. Neighborhoods that have no police protection are prone to violence and antisocial behaviors that disproportionately affect immigrant children.

School Factors.

School is one of the most important influential factors to enhance children’s academic success because school connects children to the larger community outside of family home (Han, 2008) and its importance is unquestionable. Han (2008) discussed the academic trajectories of immigrant children in relation to their school environment and described as follows:

Regarding school characteristics, children of immigrants were more likely than native-born White children to attend schools that were public or that had a

higher composition of poor or minority students, lower average academic performance, a poor student learning environment, less school support for teachers, and poor teaching environments, a worse school climate, and poorer school safety (Han, 2008, p. 1577).

Han (2008) stated that schools that are serving minority or immigrant children are failing in the provision of a supportive school climate by institutionalizing low academic expectations for immigrant children. Such schools are not well equipped with educational resources and they expose immigrant children to academic failure. In addition, immigrant children are more likely to attend schools with multiple school risk factors such as crowded classroom space, less supply of text books, discriminatory treatment, and safety problems (Han, 2008, p. 1573). The United States Department of Education's 2011 Education Report revealed that only 68% of high school students graduated from high poverty schools while 91% graduated from low poverty schools (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2011 & National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011).

The American Psychological Association (APA) identified important issues related to immigrant families and their children. It says, "Meeting the needs of immigrant-origin students has not been a national priority in today's high-stakes testing, school-reform environment....This population is largely, and continuously overlooked and underserved" (APA, Executive Summary, 2012. p. 8). Specific educational needs of children of immigrants should be systematically (APA, 2012) researched and evidence-based research findings be presented to policy makers and educational service leadership. The findings will help to take remedial actions to alleviate the current school problems and give priority to close the achievement gap.

The Presidential Task Force on Immigration stated that, “Every educator and school support member must consider immigrant children’s education as part of their responsibility” (APA Executive Summary, 2012). It will be only a dream to expect better education outcomes from children of immigrants without a holistic approach in taking action from all stakeholders, as clearly stated in the APA presidential report.

Conceptual Framework

The social capital theory framework emphasizes that “any aspect of social structure that creates value and facilitates the actions of the individual within that social structure (Akdere, 2005, p. 1). The active connections between immigrant children and their families, schools, community and neighborhood relationships play significant role in shaping the development and academic performance of the children at large (McNeal, 1999).

The lack of organized and resourceful social capital in neighborhoods and communities hamper the physical and mental development of children; especially immigrant children who come from poor families who don’t have resources and the knowledge to compensate for the shortage of support that hamper their academic performance. All major social capital theorists define social capital as that focused on relationships and the access to resources gained through the relationships (Bank, 2007). Many of social capital research designs on education are aimed at measuring achievement on the bases of test scores, grades, and school progress made through the educational pipe line (Bank, 2007, p. 3).

Social capital can be viewed in three models as stated by Akdere (2005). They are Macro, Mezzo and Micro level models. The macro level social capital includes government

institutions such as the Department of Education that carries out the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation enacted in 2002 (<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED490924.pdf>).

Macro Level

The NCLB legislation is a good example of a macro level policy (Fix & Capps, 2005) that impacted immigrant students because of lack of English language proficiency who are schooled with low income and low English proficiency (LEP) students that creates language acquisition difficulties among the children. “No Child Left Behind also poses many challenges for children of immigrants, LEP students, and the schools serving them, particularly those with large numbers of children of immigrants. Because of ongoing residential and school segregation by race, ethnicity, and income, many schools are linguistically segregated” (<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED490924.pdf>).

“Over half (53 percent) of LEP students attend elementary and secondary schools where over 30 percent of their classmates are LEP; conversely, 57 percent of English proficient students attend schools where less than 1 percent of all students are LEP (Van Hook and Fix 2000)” (<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED490924.pdf>). The lack of competent and resourceful social capital among immigrant families exposed their children to attending low performing schools and left behind academically.

Mezzo Level

The mezzo level social capital (Akdere, 2005, p. 5) can be identified as the pursuit of social identity and belonging that immigrant children consider as their own organization and are included in such organizations without fear, intimidation, or stereotyped because of their origin, language or color of skin. For example, the Oromo Community of Minnesota is a

nonprofit (<http://www.oromocommunitymn.org/Home.aspx>) organization that provides social services, homework assistance and cultural awareness to Oromo immigrants and their children in Minnesota. The services create a sense of belonging and identity while the youth is struggling to assimilate into the American way of life. The mezzo level social capital can be viewed as a buffer zone between the larger institutions and provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services to alleviate anti-social behaviors and school drop outs that enhances school performance. Community level social capital increases the likelihood of immigrants' children grade point average (GPA) because of positive role model in the community (Pong & Hao, 2007) that can be interpreted as a bridging capital between the higher institutions and local community members who have no access to resource at large (Bank, 2007).

Micro Level

This model of social capital addresses individual's ability to mobilize resources by creating networks with families and friends, social and community organizations (Akdere, 2005). The micro level social capital helps to understand how individuals' capacity can foster the well-being of immigrant children in the new country, culture and weather and play a role model in collaboration with others to enhance immigrant children's school success.

Research question: What are the major factors contributing to immigrant children's low academic performance as compared to native US-born children? How do these factors affect the school success of immigrant children?

What measures need to be taken to alleviate academic achievement gap among immigrant children that is affecting the children's well-being and their future success in social, economy and employability?

Methodology

The interest in this research project is to identify the major factors contributing to academic achievement gap among immigrant children as compared to native-born children in the United States. The researcher used a qualitative research method in this research project because, in its nature, it helps to get an in-depth understanding of naturalistic settings; this method avoids the use of initial impression and utilizes a detailed examination of raw data for quality measures and analysis of the data (Sofaer, 2002, p. 329) Also, this method focuses on naturally emerging languages and the meanings individuals assign to their own experiences (Berg, 2001, p. 10), <https://mthoyibi.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/qualitative-research-methods-for-the-social-sciences-bruce-l-berg-2001.pdf>. The researcher collected raw data through a number of semi structured interviews over a period of three weeks in January 2015. The design of the study is based on phenomenological qualitative research method (Groenewald, 2004 & Lester, 1999.) Lester (1999) described phenomenological research design as follows:

Phenomenological approaches are based in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and emphasize the importance of personal perspective and interpretation. As such they are powerful for understanding subjective experience, gaining insights into people's motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom (Lester, 1999 p. 1).

Furthermore, Lester (1999) says that the phenomenological approach in qualitative research design is good at surfacing deep issues and making voices heard in promoting action or challenging the status quo to promote the desired change.

Sample

Sample selection was one of the most important factors in this qualitative research process in finding qualifying interview participants based on the proposed method of selection. Parents, teachers and school social workers were the subjects of the sample. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was used in this research. Key informants or prospective participants (Marshall, 1996, Coyne, 1997) were selected based on being age 18 and above and a parent of immigrant child, a teacher, or a school social worker who works with immigrant children. Snowball technique, word of mouth, and willingness to participate were some of the criteria for selection of participants in the research (Tremblay, 2009, p. 692).

There were eight adult participants who took part in the research interview who responded to the flyer (see Appendix B) and also heard about the interview through snowball technique and word of mouth. Hoepfl (1997) says that maximum variation between participants can yield common pattern from groups of people with shared impacts of a given program. The participants vary in their educational level, demographics and countries of origin while their views and understanding in immigrant children's academic achievement is found to be similar in many ways. The participants' experiences of working with immigrant children or raising immigrant children yielded significant results about factors contributing to academic achievement gap among immigrant children. The selection was done according to researcher's

proposed plan of sampling technique. The researcher found that this method is the most common sample technique in a qualitative study and purposefully selected because it fits the study requirements (Marshall, 1996).

Protection of Human Subjects

Recruitment and Interview Process

The protection of confidentiality of participants was one of the most important factors in both recruitment and interview processes. All recruited participants were contacted individually and the interviews were conducted in places that were quiet and without distraction. The interviews were audio recorded and kept in password protected electronic forms where access to the recordings are guaranteed only for the researcher. No names or any kind of demographic information of participants are recorded to avoid breach of confidentiality.

Confidentiality

The confidentiality of data and the subjects involved in the interview process are kept safely from anyone except the researcher. Data storage, retention, access and transcription are conducted by the researcher and no one can have access to the documents. Researcher's home is where password protected computer is locked in a safe box where opening key is only handled by the researcher. During data presentation, individuals involved in the data collection are not revealed in the presented data.

Protocol for Insuring Informed Consent

The study participants were asked to read and review the consent form before they signed on the forms. The procedures of the interview, background information, risk and benefit in the interview, compensation, confidentiality, voluntary nature of the study, contact and questions, and statement of consent are included in the form (Appendix C).

Data Collection and Procedures

The Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas approved the research project in December 2014. After the approval, the researcher advertised the project through posting flyers in schools, community centers, public and private organizations. The researcher also communicated to organizations that were willing to participate in the research interview as approved by the IRB. The researcher contacted key informants (Marshall, 1996, p. 524), 3 school social workers, 2 teachers who teach immigrant children and 3 parents of immigrant children for the interview. The researcher provided information to potential interview participants about the interview procedures before the start of the interview. Each participant was given the opportunity to ask questions about the interview and the researcher answered the questions promptly. Finally, the researcher and the participants agreed on date of interview, place of interview, and time of interview. The eight participants were informed about their formal role participation (Tremblay, 2009) and confirmed their willingness for participation in the interview. All communications about the interview process were confidential, according to the confidentiality statements in the consent form.

The researcher asked each participant to review the consent form (Appendix C) and sign before any data collection began or Interview coding started. After the review was completed,

each participant signed the form. Each Interview participant also agreed to audio recording and signed the consent form indicating acceptance. Interviewing and data recording continued in a silent and closed room at each interview site. All recordings were 100% successful and the researcher saved the data on personal computer that is password protected. The researcher collected the data through participant interview in January 2015 at four different locations in Minnesota

After the completion of the interview, the researcher asked participants if they wanted to receive summary of the findings. All participants said yes, to get the summary of the findings after the research is completed and is ready for dissemination of the findings based on the University's procedures.

Measurement of the data:

The researcher organized the questions in a semi-structured format with a total number of 10 questions (see Appendix A). The first question consisted of demographic information of participants as illustrated below:

- A. Age: all participants were over 35 years old
- B. Gender: 62% male and 38% female
- C. Educational level: The highest level was Master's degree and the lowest level was college diploma

Forty percent of the questions addressed the main themes of the research project that the researcher considered major contributing factors to academic achievement gap among immigrant children. These main themes are family, school, neighborhood, and socio-economic

status factors. The other remaining questions addressed the four main themes in the research project. These semi-structured questions are open-ended questions to gain in-depth understanding of the contributing factors from participants' views, knowledge, thoughts and experiences about achievement gap among immigrant children.

The other open ended questions outside of the main themes helped participants to relate important other issues to the major factors and increased the scope of explanation and understanding of the problems that the researcher found valuable for the research findings. The researcher gave enough time for participants to share their own ideas and views that resulted in new themes that strengthened the research proposal and literature review. The average time consumed for the interview was six hours for all participants and 47 minutes average for each participant which was within the limit of the anticipated length of time for each interview participant.

Data Analysis

Collaborative social research approach (Berg, 2001) is applied in this research project because the researcher is intending to prepare research based ground for change and action on the factors contributing to achievement gap. Berg (2001) stated about such approach as follows:

The analysis of data gathered in such collaborative studies is accomplished with the participation of the subjects who are seen by the researcher as *stakeholders* in the situation in need of change or action. Data are collected, and then reflexively considered both as feedback to craft action and as information to

understand a situation, resolve a problem... (Berg, 2001, P. 240).

(https://mthoyibi.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/qualitative-research-methods-for-the-social-sciences_bruce-l-berg-2001)

The qualitative research interview conducted by the researcher guided the analysis of the data. A qualitative methodology data analysis was used (Ohman, 2005, p. 277) based on a Grounded Theory derived the themes from a raw and concrete data collected during the interview. The researcher used inductive analysis that starts from particular to the general idea and produces reliable and valid findings (Thomas, 2006, p. 237). This method helped the researcher to be familiarized with the content of the data, gaining in-depth understanding of the themes and events covered during the interview process with all subjects of the interview (Thomas, 2006, p. 241). Content analysis was used to systematically organize the data into a structured and analyzable format (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig 2007).

The major themes included in the data analysis were school, neighborhoods, family and socioeconomic status. Other themes brought up by interview participants were the factors of age based school placement, lack of bi-lingual and multi-cultural teachers and school support staff, standardized test without exception, and considering teachers as authority figures by immigrant families.

The researcher transcribed the audio recordings and read the transcriptions several times in a private room to avoid distractions from environmental factors. The interviewer analyzed the transcription and coded major themes that were emerged from the interviews. New themes were emerging during each interview coding. The researcher analyzed, coded, and

compared themes for their similarities and differences from eight interview participants on each of the ten questions.

Eight colored markers were used to compare answers of each participant on each question. Totally, 80 comparisons were recorded on a field notebook prepared for this purpose. Those major themes on the same issue were marked with the same color for comparison across all interviews. In the next stage of the analysis, the themes were identified by the researcher. The identification of the themes helped to find similarities and differences of views, ideas, thoughts, and understandings on each particular theme by each participant in the interview; this process cleared the way for interesting findings of new themes on factors contributing to academic achievement gap among immigrant children. Literature review supported major themes in the proposal were analyzed based on each participant's experience and views of each major theme.

Findings

There were eight participants interviewed for this research project who are different in age group, educational level and cultural background; their similarity is based on having significant role in immigrant children's educational outcome and their common concern about achievement gap among immigrant children. The participants were over the age of 35 years with a maximum educational level of Master's degree and a minimum of college diploma. 63% participants directly worked with immigrant children as school social workers and teachers while 37% percent participants were parents of immigrant children. Five (63%) participants identified themselves as male while 37% of them identified themselves as female.

Demographics

The first interview question was about demographic information of participants (see Appendix A).

The second interview question was, “What are the major factors that contribute to academic achievement gap among immigrant children”? There are several contributing factors stated by all participants based on their experiences of working with the children. Among the factors stated by the interviewees are lack of English language skill, age based placement, low stability of family, Traumatic war zone and refugee camp experience, low family socio economic status and low family school involvement, shortage of bilingual teachers and staff and lack of role models in school settings and neighborhoods. These are just a few of the factors identified by participants about why immigrant children lag behind in academic achievement as compared to native-born children (Interview participants, 2015).

Eight (100%) participants stated that *lack of English language learning* is one of the most important factors in causing achievement gap among immigrant children. One participant said, “We don’t know if it is a learning disability or lack of English skill when language skill assessment is done or questions asked in class”. Six (75%) participants said *age based school placement* and treating immigrant children under the same category in standardized testing is the other important factor for the prevalence of achievement gap among these children. One participant said, “A student is placed in 7th grade and can’t write and read but placed because of the age; this is creating a huge achievement gap.” Six (75%) participants said shortage of

bilingual and multicultural teachers and staff members caused *lack of role models* in schools who may they look as a model from their own. Immigrant participants, especially, were very sad and emotionally moved when talking about the lack or shortage of role models in schools for immigrant children.

Neighborhood Factors

The researcher asked participants about neighborhood factors in contributing to achievement gap. One significant theme emerged from this question. Eight (100%) participants were concerned about neighborhood safety for immigrant children. The neighborhood safety problem was raised fifteen times across participants. One participant said, "Students don't think about education, but think about their safety; they say, "What is going to happen to me? And they fear being harmed." The researcher asked about the causes of fear in the neighborhood. Participant #4 said, "Immigrant students are bullied, teased and beaten up on school buses." Participant #5 said, "We fear to ask other people to support our children, because we don't know what will happen to them in the hands of neighbor or even friends." The researcher thought that fear is hanging over children of immigrants and their parents and that is a serious barrier for academic achievement, especially, for new immigrant children and parents. In response to the fear in the neighborhoods, factors fostering resiliency among immigrant children should be assessed and implemented to reduce such damaging impact of fear and safety issues. Six (75%) participants said immigrant families are living in poor neighborhoods where their children are caught up with poor performing schools. Three (38%) participants' expectation of school success in poor neighborhoods is low. Participant #3 said, "What do you expect from such poor neighborhoods?"

Family School Involvement

The researcher asked the participants about school involvement of immigrant parents in academic support of their children. It is widely accepted that parents are early influential teachers of their children (Sadowski, 2004, p. 95). The researcher found that two outstanding themes emerged across all interviews. First, eight (100%) participants thought that *low immigrant family educational background* contributed to low school involvement and low assignment or homework support for their children. Six (75%) participants said that a large number of immigrant parents could not support their children academically when their children entered middle school. Second, six (75%) participants said that an immigrant family consider teachers as *authority figures* and are reluctant to get involved with school matters. This thought of authority figure contributes to the family's low school involvement, less support, and follow up of their children's academic work. Participant #7 said, "Teachers are considered as second parents and the home culture is not changed." The consequences of such perceptions are huge because lack of family support contributes to the factors that lower achievement of children. Six (75%) participants stated that many immigrant families have two jobs and do not have enough time to support their children academically or involved in school activities.

School Environment

The researcher asked participants about school environment for immigrant children. It was surprising that significant differences of views emerged on this question and major themes were identified. Four (50%) participants viewed school environment as not being a supportive

environment for immigrant children's school success. Three (38%) participants viewed integration as a difficult condition for immigrant children to overcome within a short period; these participants said that language and *cultural factors* were *barriers* to communicate with teachers and support staff as they entered schools. Two (25%) participants said anxiety, panic, and depression are observed among immigrant children because of new school environment. Three participants said, "Fear of failing in school because of low comprehension of subject matter and misunderstanding with teachers are reasons for achievement gap." The researcher found another version of school environment for immigrant children.

Three (38%) participants viewed school environment as good and welcoming for immigrant children. One participant said, "School is where diversity and richness of culture are valued." However, two (25%) participants viewed school environment as an unwelcome environment, especially for new immigrant children and is one of the contributing factors for achievement gap, one participant said immigrant children don't get enough attention because they are embedded in large numbers of students. The researcher found out that the courage of immigrant children is appreciated by seven (88%) of the participants. One participant said, "Under difficult life conditions, my immigrant students are doing very well in class".

Resource Utilization

The researcher asked the participants about library resource utilization by immigrant children. Six (75%) participants said that the lack of information and orientation in native language about available resources is a hindrance for immigrant children to access library resources. If these conditions are improved, participants said, that might result in increased

children's success in school. Five (63%) participants also said being a newcomer with a low level of English language skills put immigrant children and their parents at disadvantage in accessing available resources; as a result, immigrant students' success is negatively affected because of a lack of enough school supporting resources from the library or family.

Language Impact

The researcher asked the impact of home language on achievement gap. Eight (100%) participants expressed their feelings about how low English skills is affecting immigrant children in their attempt to succeed in school. Four (50%) were concerned that immigrant children are "Well behind in English vocabulary" and unable to compete with native-born children in school. Three (38%) participants gave their own interpretation to English language effect as, "huge problem, huge gap, frustrating, really challenging, literacy *matters*", when it comes to the learning situation of immigrant children. One of the participant said that frustrated immigrant children see schools negatively when they fail and failure is considered to be the result of low English language skill and age based placement. Four (50%) participants said it takes four or more years to compete in English or it takes years to be literate in English and it has huge impact on academic success. During the interview, the researcher found that there are advocates for home languages. Five (63%) were concerned about the loss of native language where immigrant children are becoming *monolingual* as their counterpart American born peers. One participant characterized the monolingual phenomenon as follows:

Losing home language does not help children, Devaluation of home language is not acceptable, it is not valuing culture and tradition of children, and it is role reversal (participant #3, 2015).

Remedial Action

The other interview question asked was about remedial actions schools may have taken or need to take to close achievement gap among immigrant children. Five (63%) participants were concerned with shortage of teacher training in bi-lingual and multi-cultural teaching skills that is contributing to academic achievement gap among immigrant children. Four (50%) participants said dual immersion programs started in some schools should be encouraged to engage other schools to follow the same path to reduce the achievement gap among the children. The absence or shortage of role models to whom immigrant children can look up to, for success in schools was considered by 63% of the participants as one of the impeding factors for academic success in schools.

Four (50%) participants said bi-lingual and multi-cultural assistant teachers can reduce the current achievement gap among immigrant children. The researcher found that the two hyphenated words, bi- and multi-, indicate that the implementation of more than one language for instruction, and more multi-cultural approach in teaching would alleviate achievement gap. Also, dual immersion school program is considered as one of remedial actions in closing the achievement gap among immigrant children. The thoughts and experiences of participants show that a *single solution* cannot help to solve achievement gap among this group. Three (38%) participants talked about tutoring, *collaboration* and *partnership* with other community

based organizations as some of the best ways to reduce the current achievement gap.

Participant # 8 said that assessment of language skill needs and provision of tutoring support programs are few of remedial actions some schools are taking to alleviate achievement gap and that needs to be continued at large.

Family Socio-economic Status

The researcher finalized the interview questions by asking participants about the effect of socio-economic status of immigrant families on achievement gap among their children. Five (63%) participants believed that immigrant families left their home country leaving behind their financial and material resources, and were struggling to recover from war trauma and loss of financial resources. Four (50%) said that immigrant families have low socio economic status and as a result, their children show low academic success. One participant observed immigrant children and said, "Many kids come to school without food". Immigrants are categorized as minorities and one participant said, "Minorities are living in poverty whether lived many years or not in the country; the more family is stressed economically, the more children are stressed in school and less achievement".

One participant observed the resiliency of immigrant children under low economic condition and gave the following statement:

Surprisingly some do well in school despite stressors; lots of immigrant children are strong in academic (Participant #8, 2015).

Five (63%) participants credited the strong belief of immigrant families in their children to succeed in school despite their own economic stress and low educational levels.

Discussion

The findings of the study are congruent with the literature reviews and previous findings concerning academic achievement gap among immigrant children. The study found that poor school and neighborhood conditions, low family school involvement and socio-economic status and individual factors are found to be the major contributing factors for the achievement gap. Eight (100%) of the interview participants had common ground on the importance of highlighting the major factors contributing to achievement gap. Some of these factors are low family school involvement, low English skills of parents and children, age based school placement, shortage of bi-lingual and multicultural teachers and staff members, poor schools and neighborhoods for immigrant families and children that contribute to the gap at large. The first years of immigrant children's school engagement is found to be critical years for future success in schools.

The main themes in the research project, school, neighborhood, family, socioeconomic status were compared to previously conducted research findings regarding their contribution to the academic achievement gap.

School

Seventy five percent of interview participants viewed school environment for immigrant children as unwelcome and a non-supportive environment. Five (63%) participants said age based student placement and standardized test provision without exception and under the same condition with native-born children for immigrant children, exposed them to fear and school dropouts. One of the participant said, "Standardized test is hard for them, there is no

exception, lots of times take same exam without understanding the material". Furthermore, some participants (50%) said that the fear of failing in school caused anxiety, panic, and depression as well as a strained relationship with family among immigrant children; these mental health problem behaviors observed by the participants are not widely spoken of when it comes to immigrant families' knowledge of the problem. School performance problems of the children is related to such underlying conditions when the latent content analysis of these factors are considered deeply.

The absence or shortage of role models who understand the children and speak their languages in schools exacerbated the achievement gap among these children. These and other following factors are supported by previous researchers as indicated in the literature review and given below:

Regarding school characteristics, children of immigrants were more likely than native-born ... children to attend schools that were public or that had a higher composition of poor or minority students, lower average academic performance, a poor student learning environment, less school support for teachers, and poor teaching environments, a worse school climate, and poorer school safety (Han, 2008, p.1577).

The absence or shortage of trained bi-lingual and multi-cultural teachers in a majority of the schools contributed a major part in the prevalence of achievement gap among immigrant children. Seventy five percent of interview participants stated that it takes some years for immigrant children to compete with native-born children in English language proficiency; getting acquainted with established culture of teaching, learning, and testing methods is

difficult to attain in a short period of time. The English language phenomenon for immigrant children and their parents is characterized by most participants (88%) as a huge problem, huge gap, frustrating, really challenging, literacy matters and well behind in English vocabulary. This characterization speaks for itself that the achievement gap continues among immigrant children revolving around if appropriate action is not taken soon than later. Participant #8 said, “Kids truly feel they are not accepted very well”. The combination of these factors is a huge factor that needs to be understood when it comes to achievement gap among immigrant children.

There were different views and understandings reflected by thirty eight percent of participants. These participants thought that school environment is a welcoming environment that value diversity and richness of culture with respect and love. The views of these participants and other participants who view school environment differently is left for further future research.

Neighborhood

Neighborhood factor was found to be one of the important factors that contributes to academic achievement gap. Seventy five percent of interview participants thought that immigrant families are living in poor neighborhoods and immigrant children are embedded in these neighborhoods. The effect of poor neighborhood on immigrant children’s mental health condition is described by Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2003) as follows:

Children living in neighborhoods with low Socio-economic status are found to be exposed to mental health problems that directly affect their academic achievement (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003, p. 28-29).

Participants raised the mental health concern of immigrant children. Twenty five percent of participants directly mentioned depression, anxiety, and panic among immigrant children because of fear of failing in schools due to low comprehension of subject matters in English. The question that comes up with this finding is that whether this problem is addressed appropriately to immigrant parents and their children by responsible authorities. This major issue needs to be addressed in public forums where further research is required for validity of the problem to take appropriate action.

One hundred percent of participants viewed the problem of neighborhood safety as one of the important factors that contribute to achievement gap. The causes of safety concerns are enumerated as bullying, teasing, and beating on school buses or school environments. The expectation of school success in unsafe environment and poor neighborhoods is questioned by thirty eight percent of participants. Pong & Hao (2007) discussed that peer influence in the neighborhood may end up in opposition to parents' and society's value and children could be engaged in anti-social behavior; similarly, fifty percent of participants said that immigrant children are becoming materialistic children by viewing their peers in the neighborhoods.

The lack of role models, academically and financially influential figures (Participant #4) in immigrant neighborhoods, forced immigrant children to imitate what they see in their neighborhoods; negative impressions are imitated in poor neighborhoods. One participant

described immigrant children's need in the neighborhood as follows: "If they don't get it the right way, they will try to get it the wrong way," one participant said. The experience and knowledge of interview participants on immigrant children's condition in neighborhoods or school environment is so great and educational from which a lesson could be drawn in alleviating achievement gap among the children.

Family

Parents are considered as the earliest and most influential teachers of their children (Sadowski, 2004). One hundred percent of interview participants agreed that immigrant parents value education as the passage from poverty to self-independence, particularly, economically. Families are not talking about their own educational success, but the success is interpreted in terms of their children's success in education (75% of participants). The importance of family school involvement and academic support for their children is considered as the most important factor in academic achievement for children. However, because of low educational background and low English language skills, families could not help their children academically as they like to do so where 88% of participants agreed on this claim.

This study found that beyond elementary school, a large number of immigrant families couldn't help their children academically and are out of information about their children's school condition whether success or failure (75% participants). The other important finding in this study is the assumption and beliefs of immigrant parents about school teachers. Half of participants said that, "Teachers are considered as authority figures", by immigrant parents and they are reluctant to talk to teachers because it is thought that schools will take care of

everything. Participant number seven said, "Teachers are considered as second parents". On the other hand, American parents who get involved in school and in their children's school work consider their roles as that of teacher (Grolnick & et al., 1997, p. 538). In order to fill this gap, the involvement of bi-lingual and bi-cultural teachers and support staff in schools is vital as voiced by interview participants in the findings, in hyphenated terms, such as bi-, multi-, and dual immersion education. These are strong terms to be heard in the intervention strategy in alleviating achievement gap among immigrant children.

Socio-economic Status

Eighty-Eight percent of participants stated that immigrant families are in low socio-economic status because majority of them came without resources. One hundred percent of participants viewed immigrant family income as not sufficient enough to support their children's academic needs and other family demands when compared to US born parents. However, participants said, "Parents do whatever they can to help their children succeed in school". It was stated by one participant that minorities are living in poverty irrespective of how long they lived in the country. The interview participants viewed that the effects of family's low income is reflected on the academic performance of their children. "Researchers have known that poverty in childhood is linked with a range of negative adult socioeconomic outcomes, from lower educational achievement and behavioral problems to lower earnings in the labor market" (Borjas, 2011, p. 247).

The study found that the effects of low socioeconomic status of family is not only affecting academic achievement of their children negatively. The *well-being* of their children is

compromised. The participants have already discussed about anxiety, depression and panic among immigrant children, especially, when they fail in school. The experiences of interview participants is directly correlated with what research findings reported earlier. Borjas (2011) says, "Some studies attempting to uncover the root causes of these adverse outcomes have found evidence suggesting that poverty affects social and emotional development, with children raised in poverty having higher incidence of behavioral problems that are likely to mar the school experience and lead to poorer academic outcome" (Borjas, 2011, p. 249).

Thirty-eight percent of participants stated that some immigrant children do family jobs such as childcare, cooking, cleaning, and interpretation. Most families have two jobs to secure income for their children and family members. For the children, the lack of enough time to study or complete assignment can affect their education outcome. The study found that the relationship and support between children and their parents is not affected and the children are found to be resilient in handling both schoolwork and housework. However, the effect of dual responsibility on school success requires attention from both parents and school leaders.

Finally, one committee member identified a theme of "Universality of Humanity", which was shown in the content analysis when 2 subjects, from different professions, acted with altruism toward the children which was above their professional responsibility. As these professionals observed children in their classroom, they recognized conditions that do not encourage the children to be successful in school and may contribute to the achievement gap among the immigrant children. Recognizing the conditions, they took action to respond to their needs, saying, "This is our social responsibility." Please see Appendix D for further discussion, including a new perspective that has developed from the data as well from the experience of

participants. From Social responsibility and Universality of humanity themes, "*Human Content Theory*" was developed by the clinical researcher based on the manifest and latent content analysis found in Appendix D.

Strengths and Limitations

The strength of this research project is the opportunity for stakeholders to freely express their views, experiences, in-depth understanding, and thoughts of the factors that contribute to immigrant children academic achievement gap. The researcher anticipated that the findings will initiate community conversation and may encourage stakeholders to work together to alleviate the achievement gap, especially among immigrant children. As a matter of fact, the researcher's use of collaborative social research approach (Berg 2001) in the data analysis directly matched with the anticipated result from this research. The limitation is the assumption that the finding may not be applicable to the broader community. Because it is not a longitudinal study, its applicability to the larger community is not warranted overtime and further study is recommended. However, these findings will initiate new conversation among those impacted by the achievement gap affecting immigrant children including school administrators and policy makers at local, State, and Federal levels.

Implication for Social Work Practice, Education, Research, Intervention

The study revealed significant issues concerning academic achievement gaps among immigrant children. The major contributing factors to academic achievement gaps among immigrant children are discussed in the literature review and the findings part of the paper. The interview participants' concern for the well-being of immigrant children's mental health

condition is supported by previous researchers such as Borjas (2011). The possibility of the development of emotional and behavioral problems due to poverty requires attention be given by professionals, particularly, in the field of social work and related professional fields.

Implication for Education

Psychological terms such as panic, depression and anxiety, observed by interview participants, are connected to academic achievement in schools where the failure in achievement will push children to panic and depression and as a result, problem behavior. These psychological terminologies may not be interpreted or solved by school leaders or teachers without appropriate training in the field of social work or other relevant fields.

Implication for Intervention

Primary intervention in school social work services is one of the responsibilities of social workers. There is no numerical number in this study to figure out the number of social workers to the proportion of immigrant children in schools who need behavioral or school related support. However, social workers must be aware of these problems and work to bridge the gap between schools and families so that family school involvement has the opportunity to improve from the current low involvement as indicated in the findings of the study.

Implication for Research

It will be imperative for school social workers to conduct collaborative research with stakeholders who are willing to bring change through common action, especially, in increasing

family involvement in schools, monitoring of immigrant children's well-being, and academic performance and fostering positive child-parent relationship

Implication for Social Work Value

It is social work's core value to advocate for social justice. The research finding indicated that immigrant families and their children are facing problems in advocating for themselves in the first years of their arrival; it is because of lack of proficiency in English skills and cultural difference barriers. Therefore, social workers have the responsibility to bridge the barriers and contribute in alleviating academic achievement gap among immigrant children that increases academic success.

<http://work.chron.com/top-5-values-being-social-worker-11466.html>

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview questionnaires

1. Demographics

How old are you?

Male or Female or other?

Educational level: high school grad, GED, Diploma, 4 year college, other_____

What is your ethnicity or race?

2. In your experience as an immigrant or as a person working with immigrants and their children,

a) What are the factors that contribute to the academic achievement of immigrant children?

b) Which of these factors affect academic achievement positively and which ones affect negatively?

3. In what ways do you think neighborhoods help or hinder the academic achievement of immigrant children?

4. In your experience, what is the nature of immigrant parents' school involvement in support of their children?

5. In your experience, what is the school environment like for immigrant children in general?

6. Do you know that immigrant children are equally utilizing library resources as compared to native US-born children? If not, why?

7. Are immigrant children perceived as a burden on American schools?

8. How do you explain the impact of language of origin other than English on academic achievement and family's school involvement?

9. Do you think schools are taking remedial actions to close the achievement gap of immigrant children? How? Please provide examples

10. How does families' socioeconomic status affect academic performance of immigrant children?

APPENDIX B

Flyer for schools/Community Centers

Clinical Research Project by graduate social work student

Academic Achievement Gap: The Case of Children of Immigrants

- Subject:** Qualitative research interview
- Who:** Social Workers/counselors, teachers who have experience of counseling and teaching immigrant children in school setting related to academic performance, & factors limiting academic achievement. Interested parents of immigrant children and teachers who are teaching immigrant children are invited to participate in the interview. Additionally, parents of immigrant children will have access to this flyer and will be asked to volunteer to be interviewed to share their views and understandings of their children's experiences at schools.
- Purpose:** The purpose of the research project is to get the views and ideas of key interview participants through a semi-structured interview; and gain deep understanding of the factors that contribute to immigrants' children academic achievement gap as compared to native-born children and how these factors affect academic performance of immigrant children.
- What:** The interview participants will be asked to contact and meet the principal researcher after the research project is approved by the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB). The interview will take 45-60 minutes. The questions are prepared by the researcher and the interview will be conducted in a designated place for one-on-one interview and audiotaped for the analysis of the data. The signed consent form will be kept for at least 3 years per Federal Policies.
- Risk and Benefits:** There will be no benefit for the participants and there is no known risk for **being interviewed.**
- Contact information:** If you are interested to be the interview participant, please contact the graduate student researcher, Dukassa Lemu, at 612-207-1582 or meldukassa@gmail.com, lemu8491@stthomas.edu
- Note:** The participation is based on voluntariness and experiences of participants

APPENDIX C**CONSENT FORM****UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS**

Academic achievement gap: The Case of Children of Immigrants

IRB tracking number: 6701931

I am conducting a study about the academic achievement gap among immigrant children as compared to native US-born children and to identify the major contributing factors for the gap. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because as a teacher, counselor/social worker and parent you have enough experience to share and potential to provide relevant information to the study of academic achievement gap among children of immigrants. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

PROCEDURES:

If you agree to be in the study I will ask you to meet with me at a place that is convenient for you and review and sign this consent form. Following your consent, I will ask you to participate with me in the interview that will last about 45 minutes to one hour. This interview will be audiotaped and I will also be taking some notes and you are free to discontinue the interview at any point without any negative consequences.

This study is being conducted by: Dukassa Lemu, whose research advisor is Dr. Karen T. Carlson at University of ST. Thomas, School of Social Work. I am MSW graduate student at St. Catherine University and University of St. Thomas School of Social Work.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study: The purpose of the research project is to get the views and ideas of key participants through semi-structured interview; and gain deep understanding of the factors that contribute to immigrants' children academic achievement gap as compared to native US-born children and how these factors affect academic performance of immigrant children.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

There are no known risks of being in the study.

Direct benefit: None

Compensation: There will be no compensation for the participants

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include audio taping records, interview questions, and written reports. I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in one way or the other. The audio recordings & transcripts, and computer records are kept with password protected electronic file where nobody will have access to the records except the researcher. The signed consent forms and written notes containing identifying information will be kept in a locked file cabinet that only the researcher has access to and can unlock. The signed consent forms will be kept for at least three years following the completion of the study per Federal Policies.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time until March 15, 2015. You may terminate the interview at any point by telling me to stop. At that time the interview will be discontinued and the participants will be withdrawn from the study.

Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will be destroyed.

You are also free to skip any questions I may ask if you are not comfortable to answer.

Contacts and Questions:

My name is *Dukassa Lemu*, You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 612-207-1582. The advisor for the researcher is Dr. Karen T. Carlson and the contact number is 651-962-5867 and email address is carl1307@stthomas.edu. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6038 with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I consent to the audio taping of the interview without calling me by name.

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Print Name of Study Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date

APPENDIX D

Content Analysis

Manifest content & Latent content analysis

According to Berg (2001), content analysis has manifest content and latent content. Manifest content includes those elements that are physically present and countable; whereas latent content includes the analysis that is extended to an interpretive reading of the symbolism underlying the physical data (Berg, 2001). The manifest content is the surface structure or visibly observed message in the data while latent content is the meaning that is deeply rooted in the message found in the data (2001, p. 242). The researcher identified the messages that are physically present and deeply rooted in the raw data for the analysis.

Two scenarios established from content analysis of the raw data from the interview

Two (25%) subjects found similar conditions that are physically appearing and underlying conditions among their students. The subjects were in different locations and different institutions; they don't know each other; they are born in different countries and have different native languages. They are similar in the way that they are working with immigrant children in school settings and made similar observations on particular students. Surprisingly, their observations and actions they took are very similar in nature. The participants' educational backgrounds are different in terms of their field of qualification and level of educational. Both are closely working with immigrant children in their respective schools.

Participant #8

This participant observed an immigrant child who usually looks tired, sad, and sleepy in class and doesn't interact with other children. After several observations, the subject called the child to office and asked if something is wrong with him/her. Based on the information from the child, the participant called parents of the child and asked permission to talk to them. Permission was granted to visit the child's home. The participant found several people living in a house with few bed rooms where the child is one of them. There was no enough space to study or doing assignments in the crowded room. Participant said, "It is painful" to see a child living in this condition and questioned oneself how such child can be successful in education? On another parent home visit, the participant found a school child living with several people in one bed room apartment. A support program was organized to support needy immigrant children in the school based on the observation and assessment of immigrant children's conditions. This kind of action will be a model for other schools and should be encouraged.

Participant #7

A participant observed a child for several months who was not open to talk, always shy, feels sad, weak, and usually wears the same cloth. The subject talked to the child about the conditions he observed. After meeting with the child in office, the subject called child's parent and asked for permission to visit the child's home. The child was found to live with several siblings. There was shortage of resources for the child to be competent in school during hot season of the school in child's home. The participant asked if they have enough food. They said, no we don't. The child had no enough space and time to study or do assignments after school. The participant was very "sad" and understood why the child looked weak, hungry, and showed low participation in class. The participant helped the family in whatever he/she can and linked them to available resources in the area. He said, "We need to take social responsibility to help each other". According to Berg (2001, p. 243), blending manifest and latent content analysis is possible given enough information is gathered in the research process and analysis.

The researcher found very similar phenomenon from different research interview participants. Both participants made several month observations on their particular school children. The participants' similarity was based on working with immigrant children in their

respective institutions and observation of similar conditions. The manifest content of the analysis is the similarities different immigrant children have in their physically appearing and non-appearing conditions due to unfulfilled life conditions. The observed children were manifesting similar physical and emotional conditions.

The two participants took similar actions by visiting these children's homes with family permission to make the visit. These two different individuals work in different parts of Minnesota and have no knowledge of each other. But both of them felt *sad*, where one of the participants said, "*It is painful*" to observe how these children come to school and try to achieve educational goal without proper housing and necessary support system. Humanitarian feeling was in their heart and mind, and this is the latent part of the analysis or the underlying condition that the researcher found out. The manifest content analysis under this condition shows that the children are physically weak, hungry, sleep in class, not open to talk, show shyness; their families' living conditions are not conducive to study or doing assignments or having normal sleeping space or time. Therefore, it will be difficult to expect academic success from children living under such poor life conditions.

The researcher proposes an emerging theory from the content analysis of raw data and called the new theory, "*Human Content Theory*", that contains the following statement:

Human thoughts and actions could be similar in the helping paradigm with Humanitarian character and feelings irrespective of where they live or what they do (Researcher, 2015)

Latent content/underlying conditions: sadness & painful feeling (from participants)

Manifest content/physically observable conditions: Inactive in class, physical weakness, shyness, hungry, wear the same cloth many of the times

Actions taken by the two participants:

Participant #7: Linked the family to local support system and personally took social responsibility

Participant #8: Contributed in the support of special program for needy children in school

