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**Invite Their Languages In:  
Community-Based Literacy Practices with  
Multilingual African Immigrant Girls in New York City**

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**ABSTRACT:** This three-year qualitative case study examined how an African community-based organization, Sauti Yetu's Girl's Empowerment and Leadership Initiative (GELI), leads, bolsters, and transforms the literacy development of African immigrant girls who are identified as English Language Learners (ELLs) and Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) in New York City schools. In particular, the study addresses how community-based literacy practices mobilize multilingual African immigrant girls to strengthen their communities. The study drew upon critical perspectives of literacy and community-based practices to examine the approaches GELI has implemented to address the academic and social needs of African immigrant girls in public schools. Funding for this research was supported by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) American Fellowship.

**KEYWORDS:** Immigrants, Community Organizations, Urban Schools, Multilingual, Multicultural

[\*\*Statement of Problem\*\*](#)  
[\*\*Theoretical Framework\*\*](#)  
[\*\*Methods\*\*](#)  
[\*\*Findings\*\*](#)  
[\*\*Limitations\*\*](#)  
[\*\*Significance of Study\*\*](#)  
[\*\*References\*\*](#)  
[\*\*Author Contact\*\*](#)

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**Statement of Problem**

The increasing flow of immigration to the United States has changed the growing multicultural landscape of U.S. schooling. Since the 1900s, Latin American, Caribbean, and Asian immigration has changed the development and implementation of U.S.

curriculum to best serve the needs of English Language Learners (ELLs) (Portes & Rumbat, 2001). Consequently, politicians, educational reformers, and teachers have sought to best address the needs of the ever-changing mosaic (August & Shanahan, 2006). Nevertheless, in the midst of the growing multicultural landscape, one rising population in the U.S. has been largely ignored: African immigrants who are or were nationals in African countries. While teaching English as a second language and reforming the literacy practices of bilingual students have been popular areas of research and reform (August & Shanahan, 2006), research on the schooling experiences and literacy needs of African immigrant adolescent girls has been absent (with a few exceptions: Bangura, 2012; Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Knight, Bangura, & Watson, 2012; Watson & Knight-Manuel, 2017).

In the last few decades, the foreign-born population from Africa has grown rapidly in the United States, increasing from about 80,000 in 1970 to about 1.6 million in the period from 2008 to 2012, with the largest increase happening during these four years. In particular, the city with the largest African-born population is New York City, with 212,000 immigrants (Gambio, Trevelyan, & Fitzwater, 2014). More specifically, these newer waves of African immigrants are adolescent females who speak multiple languages deemed “low incidence,” such as Fulani and Soninke; unfortunately, these languages of low incidence do not meet the threshold for bilingual services in urban schools (Kent, 2007; Knight et al., 2014). In light of this increase, research on the social and academic needs of African immigrants in New York City is essential.

Although schooling institutions have not been able to address the necessary literacy needs of African immigrant students, community-based organizations (CBOs) have already begun to fill in the gaps. Immigrant CBOs recognize the critical need for cultivating new relationships among communities, organizations, and schools (Wilson & Habecker, 2008) to address the challenges facing the immigrant population. Such challenges include negotiating language barriers, attaining residency, and navigating educational issues of high school education, college education, and employment.

One such educational challenge is addressing the needs of an increasing African immigrant student population identified as ELLs and Students with Interrupted Formal Schooling (SIFE) in U.S. schools (Batalova & McHugh, 2010). At the secondary level, these students are placed at risk because they have unique needs defined by the limited time they have to develop literacy skills and content knowledge mastery in order to meet graduation requirements. Addressing such literacy needs of African immigrant girls is, in fact, critical, not because they are deficit needs, but because they are asset-based skills that contribute to the ever-changing mosaic of U.S. schools.

This study examines how immigrant CBOs are addressing the literacy needs that current schooling institutions have not been able to meet. Using a case study design, this three-year study examines how one unique African immigrant CBO, Sauti Yetu’s Center for African Women and Families, fosters literacy in community-based practices to support African immigrant girls and their families in urban communities.

Sauti Yetu is an immigrant-led advocacy and social service nonprofit organization in New York City that serves the growing population of African immigrant women, girls, and their families. Sauti Yetu’s uniqueness rests in the organization’s leadership initiative

among adolescent girls. In 2007, Sauti Yetu began the Girls' Empowerment and Leadership Initiative (GELI) in response to an expressed community need for a program that would address developmental needs and educational access specifically for high school-aged young women ages 14-21. GELI's members are immigrant and refugee adolescent girls from primarily Muslim and West African families living in lower-income areas of the Bronx and Brooklyn. Most are ELLs bringing with them multiple other West African languages, including French, Manlike, Wolof, and Fulani.

GELI offers a unique opportunity to understand how youth programs can address the confluence of linguistics, gender, and identity development across multiple settings and immigration. Based on preliminary results from a 2012-2013 pilot study that examined literacy programmatic activities, GELI promotes critical literacy and facilitates social praxis in a variety of ways that encourage the strengthening of African immigrant girls' academic and social lives. As the organization seeks to expand GELI's services, high-quality research is useful in deepening Sauti Yetu's understanding of the ways the organization supports and strengthens the literacy development of African immigrant adolescent girls.

The purpose of the study was to examine how Sauti Yetu's GELI supports the literacy development of African immigrant girls identified as English Language Learners (ELLs) and Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) in New York City schools. The study addressed how community-based literacy practices, defined as alternative learning sites and practices for urban multicultural education (Ball, 2000), mobilize African immigrant girls to strengthen and transform their local and global communities through a critical inquiry of themselves and their community.

The study examined how CBOs use empowering pedagogies, particularly critical literacy, to teach and challenge students to question dominant narratives about social inequities, and take up social praxis to change the dynamic constructions of knowledge, and "consider transformation of their current life situations and the life situations of others" (Ball, 2000, p. 1006). Alternative education models such as CBOS have seen a rise in urban communities (Martin & Beese, 2017), and studies demonstrate that the work of CBOs does not replace the work of traditional schools but rather builds partnerships that foster mutually beneficial practices, particularly for historically marginalized students (Brooks & Smith, 2013; Gardner, 2011; McMillon, 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Drawing from critical pedagogical frameworks, this study defines critical literacy as pedagogy that allows students to read, write, and think beyond and against the text to investigate issues of power, positioning, and perspective, and in doing so, investigates whose interests are being served and why (Jones, 2006; Morrell 2008). According to Freire and Macedo (1998), education is transformative, dialogical, and always in the process of being remade. The reality for students and teachers is a constant transformation that requires the embodiment of student-teachers and teacher-students, where each person involved in the learning process is an essential part of ongoing dialogue and critical inquiry.

In imagining and situating education as liberation, this study frames the education within CBOs as an alternative model that is transformative; particularly, it examines Sauti Yetu as an alternative space where such dialogical education happens—a deviation from the norm in current school climates where African immigrant girls are marginalized. As many critical literacy theorists have argued (Ball, 2000; Comber, 2015; Morrell, 2008; Nieto, 1999; Shor, 1992; Shor & Freire, 1987), the empowerment that comes from students' engagement with their present reality implies a strong degree of social praxis. While students are engaging in the active process of constructing meaning through language, texts, and activities, they are developing the important tools for social action, predispositions, and attitudes needed to effect change and alter patterns of domination and oppression (Nieto, 1999).

Within this study, African immigrant girls constantly evaluated who was being served, oftentimes advocating for those who had been marginalized members in their community. Specifically, they advocated for their immigrant community—being socially active in gaining actual resources for schools, providing opportunities to learn inside and outside of school through community building, extending friendship to new immigrants, and debating the creation and inclusion of diverse texts in the classroom. Therefore, engaging the girls in critical literacy practices provided opportunities for them to further participate in academic literacy, particularly in the reading, writing, and speaking of the English language.

### **Culturally Relevant Approaches in Alternative Spaces**

In Ladson-Billings's (2001) *Crossing Over to Canaan*, she proposed that we, as educators, can achieve a promised land where teachers can be prepared to adopt culturally relevant pedagogy, a model of teaching that focuses on academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Building upon the works of critical theorists, she argued that “no longer are we referring merely to the knowledge transactions that occur in the classroom but to the larger social meanings that are imparted between and among teachers, students, and their social worlds” (p. 29). According to critical theorists, knowledge transaction should be seen in larger sociopolitical contexts. Therefore, the knowledge that is needed to teach must be utilized in a much larger terrain than the knowledge needed to teach in the classroom. This knowledge must inform the democratic practices of today's society, meaning that such practices inform, transform, and engage the self with society.

Aligned with my critical constructivist framework, I argue that culturally relevant pedagogy fulfills the knowledge and practice needed for such democratic practices. Part of how such knowledge can be extended into sociopolitical consciousness is the character of culturally relevant teachers, who are first and foremost culturally competent. Ladson-Billings (2001) argued that culturally relevant teachers must acquire a level of cultural competency because it is “their job to learn about the students' cultures and their communities” (p. 99). Similarly, in her study of empowering pedagogies among multicultural students, Ball (2000) also argued that culturally competent teachers acknowledge that each classroom and each student present new sets of opportunities and challenges based on racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and language differences. Such

opportunities and challenges can include access to communal and institutional resources such as access to college-going processes, job opportunities, and extracurricular activities (Knight & Marciano, 2013). This cultural competency is particularly important to teaching and learning among African immigrant girls in New York City. This study builds upon how culturally relevant pedagogy is used among CBOs, particularly how culturally relevant texts and dialogue can promote critical literacy (Ball, 2000; Campano, 2007; Castaneda, 1997; Fránquiz, 2001; Lee, 2005; Mercado & Moll, 2000; Nieto, 1999; Rivera & Pedraza, 2000; Rolón-Dow, 2005).

By observing the girls' leadership groups and literacy groups that are held at Sauti Yetu, I examined how culturally relevant teaching in the CBO contributes to the ways these girls use knowledge to inform the democratic practices of today's society. Culturally competent teachers within Sauti Yetu's programming activities are crucial for understanding the multifaceted cultures of their students. Therefore, the study sheds light on how culturally competent teachers of CBOs can help students make sense of multiple cultural identities instead of approximating individual cultures for the purposes of academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness.

### **Sociocultural Theories: Examining Literacy as a Social and Cultural Practice Among Multilingual African Immigrant Girls and Community-Based Practices**

Sociocultural literacy examines how learning happens in a cultural practice, and how apprenticeship, participation, and adaptation of tools can be essential to learning and culture (Moll et al., 1992; Vygotsky, 1978). By adopting a sociocultural perspective, I build on the studies by Moll et al. (1992) and González et al. (1995) by acknowledging that "funds of knowledge" offer a critical perspective on how students' knowledge of their own homes and cultural backgrounds have added value in classroom literacy practices. According to González et al. (1995), funds of knowledge draw upon the knowledge and other resources found in local households for the development of classroom practice (p. 446). They argue that teachers ought to investigate the knowledge that students bring into the classroom.

Sociocultural literacies are defined as a set of social and cultural practices in which literacy involves specific ways of interacting with people, using language, and believing certain values in particular discourses (Gee, 1998/2001; González et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Moll et al., 1992; Nieto, 1999). Although the traditions of both sociocultural and critical literacy foundations are separate, recent theories and studies, such as multicultural learning and culturally relevant pedagogy, can be seen as sociocritical, adopting tenets from both foundations (Gutiérrez, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Nieto, 1999).

In addition, Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014) argue that these funds of knowledge can become "funds of identity" that are necessary for people's self-definition, expression, and understanding. In looking at the transnational identities of African immigrant girls, it is therefore important to build upon transnational ties or transnationalism, defined as "the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement" (Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992, p. 1). Scholars who study immigrant youth have argued that immigrant youth who maintain ties to more

than one country may acquire transnational funds of knowledge, which then contribute to cultural flexibility (Sánchez, 2008).

Although multiple studies have highlighted the necessity to examine the cultural knowledge of minority adolescent students (Castaneda, 1997; Fránquiz, 2001; Mercado & Moll, 2000; Nieto, 1999; Rivera & Pedraza, 2000; Rolón-Dow, 2005; Suárez-Orozco, 2017), one population that is missing from the literature base is African immigrant girls, with their rich multilingual and cultural knowledge (with a few exceptions: Bangura, 2012; Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Knight et al., 2012). Although recent literature has expanded on African immigrants in Australia, little is known about how immigrant CBOs support and strengthen the literacy development of these students in U.S. urban schools—specifically, African immigrant adolescent girls who have been identified as ELLs and SIFE (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006; Perry, 2009). This article builds on these current existing studies by examining how students of Sauti Yetu bring their multicultural, multilingual, and transnational practices into the girls' leadership and literacy groups as rich funds of knowledge.

## Methods

This three-year case study took place between 2013-2016 at two research entities: (a) The Sauti Yetu Center for African Women and Families, and (b) one public high school in New York City. The case study design was selected to look at the production of *meaning* and the relationship it has to its *context*. Aligned with the sociocultural and critical theoretical framework, meanings in text are seen as historicized, contextualized, and context-specific (Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

## Context

Sauti Yetu's GELI program situates its community-based practices in NYC public high schools. In this study, one of these partnered public New York City high schools was selected based on its continued partnership and longstanding history with Sauti Yetu. The selected high school was also attentive and supportive of the needs of the students and allowed Sauti Yetu to hold literacy support groups and leadership groups during school hours. The school was part of the International Network for Public Schools in New York City whose mission is to provide quality education for the rising number of ELLs in New York City. International high schools in this network serve recent immigrants and ELLs who enroll with four years or less of education in U.S. schools. The school's population consists of 391 students with the following demographics: 74% Hispanic, 4.8% Asian, 2.5% White (European), and 18% Black (African and Haitian).

As demonstrated by the demographics of the school, Sauti Yetu intended to serve part of the 18% Black (African and Haitian) population, with a key emphasis on developing the literacy needs of African immigrant girls. Because Sauti Yetu's GELI program had built a community-based partnership with the public high school, ethnographic

observations of their programming activities, literacy support groups, and girls' leadership groups, took place at the public high school during and after school hours. The intention of the GELI program was to provide space, time, and community for the girls to learn and build friendships with one another *within* the schooling institution.

### **Research Participants**

Aligned with a qualitative case study design, sampling was conducted through internal purposeful sampling. A purposeful sample of six program staff within Sauti Yetu, and a group of eight high school African immigrant girls who represented a range of literacy skills (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010; Maxwell, 2012) designated key agents and participants in the Sauti Yetu GELI program. All six key staff members were directly involved with the GELI program.

### **Student participants**

The focus group of eight African immigrant adolescent girls was selected based on their consistent and committed involvement to the GELI program. The student sample consisted of regular attendees and committed participants in Sauti Yetu's program who attended all three activities (leadership group, literacy group, and after-school tutoring) on a voluntary basis; thus, their regular commitment provided a comprehensive understanding of how such programming activities were supporting their needs (Merriam, 1988). Participants were immigrant female students from African countries such as Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Gambia, and Togo—all of whom were participating in Sauti Yetu's GELI program.

Each girl carried her own immigration experience, whether she had experienced transnational immigration in multiple countries or recently emigrated from an African country to New York City. All girls had been identified by their high school as ELLs and SIFE based on NYC DOE standards. It is important to discuss the multilingual, multinational, and transnational identities of the participants because the work largely centered on their immigrant and sociocultural experiences.

### **Staff participants**

The program staff sample included six key staff members who were directly involved with the GELI program. The staff members included the former Sauti Yetu program director; the 2014, 2015, and 2016 GELI program teachers, Sauti Yetu's Executive Director; and the GELI college readiness/post-HS (high school) transition coordinator. Such selection was important in order to explore and examine how literacy is seen and taught within the community-based organization (CBO) spaces in the schooling institution.

## Data Collection Methods and Procedures

The university ethics review board reviewed and approved the study, and all participants gave written consent to participate. This study examined three types of data collection methods: document review, semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic observation of program activities (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2001; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Multiple data collection methods were used for the purposes of triangulation across data, and for the purpose of gaining information about “different aspects of the phenomena” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 102).

### Document review

Documents acted as objects of collaborative discussion in the interview process and ethnographic observations and were collected to evaluate how Sauti Yetu was implementing curriculum, creating social action projects, keeping written records for academic support, and using additional documents for programming purposes. Additionally, supplemental multimodal documents such as videos, magazines, and films used during ethnographic observations were important for analyzing how the participants were taking up, engaging, and dialoguing about these documents within a sociocultural and critical literacy framework (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Morrell, 2008).

### Semi-structured interviews

Interviews took place with current staff, teachers, and small focus groups of African immigrant girls, and lasted approximately 60-90 minutes in order to understand how each participant made sense of her individual and collective experiences, and how these experiences shaped her views on literacy development for African immigrant girls. The interview protocols were informed by the literature review on sociocultural literacy, critical literacy, immigration, and community-based practices.

The focus group interviews specifically shed light on how Sauti Yetu supported African immigrant girls by asking questions centered around their immigration experience, schooling experience, experience with Sauti Yetu, and community interactions outside the classroom. I chose focus group interviews for student participants because I was looking at the ways in which critical literacy was enacted among the girls in the community spaces. How do the students view literacy? How are the students experiencing what is taught? Do they see connections between critical literacy and social action? The focus groups allowed me to examine the dynamic and dialogue among student participants. Like Madriz (1998), I regarded focus groups as a “collective testimony” (p. 116) particularly around the lives of girls in schooling institutions. In this way, I saw the singularity and unity of the focus groups as a testimony to how the African immigrant girls were experiencing immigration, migration, race, gender, and schooling experiences together as one collective group of the GELI program.

## **Ethnographic observations**

Over the course of three years, I conducted ethnographic observations at all three GELI programs (literacy groups, girls' leadership groups, and tutoring sessions) to evaluate Sauti Yetu's programming activities and to examine how Sauti Yetu is academically and socially supporting African immigrant girls within and outside of school. Such observations of their weekly classes enabled me to see how critical literacy was used within the GELI programs, and how the students were taking on social praxis in these programmatic spaces. Observations were conducted in the form of direct observations, which included observing people and their behavior (Bernard & Bernard, 2013). Such observations were used to explore and examine how critical literacy is taught and learned in GELI programs, and how such teaching opened gateways to academic achievement.

Because I was examining literacy practices, I also took note of supplemental texts and writing observed in the classroom, such as photos of student writing, teacher writing on the chalkboard, posters, chart paper, worksheets, and the like. I then collected these texts for further documentation analysis. I paid particular attention to student-teacher and student-student interaction in order to theorize how the girls were learning and engaging in critical literacy. Lastly, I wrote thematic memos each day of observations to look for patterns or themes in the data. Thematic memos recorded methodological inquiries, theoretical considerations, ethical conflicts, and analytic reflections, to make sense of, elaborate, and clarify what I was seeing (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

## **Data Analysis**

To make sense of the data, I employed analysis to understand the critical pedagogies and literacies among texts, dialogue, and activities. Through a critical and sociocultural framework, I uncovered literacy events around literacy production, to examine cultural interactions outside of school contexts.

With this framework in mind, data collection and analysis were an ongoing, simultaneous, iterative process that continued throughout the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Luttrell, 2010; Maxwell, 2012). Patterns and themes were developed by looking across data sources for connections relating to the theoretical framework and research questions. During the pilot study, the first year of the 3-year study, I analyzed the data utilizing constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008), an inductive and iterative approach to analyzing the case study. Each piece of data—interviews, observational field notes, and documents—was initially coded by data source and later by themes that emerged around literacy practices, such as “care for the self,” “critical literacy as social praxis,” and “critical literacy event.”

This study continued to use inductive and deductive coding in the subsequent two years by applying former codes that had been developed in the pilot study and new codes

that were developed from more focused literature reviews on critical literacy and social change. In addition to new codes, thematic and organizational codes were preliminarily developed and deductively based on past events and analysis in the pilot study.

Lastly, cross-case analyses across data sources were guided by comparative and analytic questions such as: What are the patterns of how critical literacy is taught among the participants? What are the patterns around community mobilization among immigrant girls? All coding processes were done by hand through numerical indexing and systematically organized by tabs/binders/folders marked as observations, interviews, and document analysis.

### **Data Analysis: Validity**

Consistent with my critical constructivist framework, this study sought to build trustworthiness through a triangulation of methods in observations, interviews, and document analysis (Cho & Trent, 2009; Maxwell, 2012; Wolcott, 2008). To attend to the soundness of my research, I paid attention to validity for the thick description purpose. Validity in the thick description purpose was used and seen through prolonged engagement. Because thick description relies on a heavy emphasis of “constructing texts in which rich descriptions are salient and in harmony with analytic interpretations,” I used triangulation with my three data sources (semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, participant observations, and document analysis) by investigating contextual meaning and relying on holistic processes. For example, in analyzing the data, I looked at how girls contextualized how to “transform their community”; to do so, I examined instances where girls were articulating how they saw themselves participating and advocating for African immigrant girls in the community-based spaces. By “relying on holistic processes,” I looked at the girls’ words in relation to the whole range of programmatic activities that attend to their physical, emotional, and social well-being. For example, I examined how their speech and actions illuminated how they were engaging with their teachers, their peers, and their community. Lastly, I conducted member checks by sending back interview transcripts to my participants to make sure that the “data collected [was] accurate in terms of a vis-à-vis agreement with participants’ because member checks reassure the accuracy of the participants’ constructions” (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 328). Although I recognized that member checks “can be a necessary but never sufficient condition for validity” (p. 333), conducting member checks allowed me to attend broadly to transactional validity. Lastly, rather than generalize the findings to all immigrant organizations, I engaged the notion of transferability to other small immigrant-based organizations (Maxwell, 2012) and intended to build on theories of critical literacy and social praxis among urban immigrant youth.

## Findings

In examining how Sauti Yetu fosters critical literacy to mobilize African immigrant girls to strengthen their local and global communities, I found that Sauti Yetu leverages critical literacy that offers social learning opportunities for ELL/SIFE students. In particular, Sauti Yetu frames the notion of critical literacy by leveraging multilingualism within local and global communities. The findings showed that Sauti Yetu fosters critical literacy through (a) leveraging multilingualism as an alternative model for educational transformation, (b) leveraging multilingualism as a gateway to bridge cultural knowledge within local and global communities, and (c) leveraging multilingualism to build relationships as a way to foster critical inquiry for girls and their community.

### **“Invite Their Languages In”: Alternative Models for Educational Transformation**

At the time the study began, the 2012-2013 New York City DOE Demographic Report (NYCDOE, 2014) reported that the largest percentage changes of ELL students from 2008-2009 to 2012-2013 included languages of low incidence such as Soninke (54.1%), Wolof (53.4%), Mandinka (38.6%), and Fulani (17.2%)—languages that the students of Sauti Yetu spoke. In an interview, Ms. Janet, a former executive director of Sauti Yetu, expressed the ways in which Sauti Yetu values the voices of their students and how schools can bring in such contributions:

I think the difference of us [Sauti Yetu GELI] from a formal classroom is that we invite their languages in—we don't try to limit them—there are bilingual classrooms where they say you speak one other language, then you only speak that language. What we are saying is that, whatever language you speak, bring it. You are going to translate for your friends—we are going to use those songs, and we are going to invite them all. Once we let go of the fear, that we wouldn't have control of the space anymore and we don't let them use those languages—the girls got to feel more comfortable and got to feel more present—we weren't limiting them to English and not to their language. We said you can speak whatever you want—whatever you want to communicate with, and we will negotiate to see how to make it work.

Ms. Janet highlighted the differences between the formal bilingual classroom and the Sauti Yetu classroom: in recognizing that the girls speak multiple languages, Sauti Yetu's intention is not to limit their languages, but to leverage all languages as a way to promote their educational growth. Ms. Janet's encouragement to translate languages and “use their songs” is a way to engage in critical dialogue among African immigrant girls.

In investigating the ways in which critical literacy engages the dialogical knowledge between both the teacher and the students, I learned that Sauti Yetu classes affirm the notion that the reality for students and teachers is a constant transformation that requires the embodiment of student-teachers and teacher-students (Freire & Macedo, 1998). Ms. Janet demonstrates that in imagining and situating education as liberation, education in

CBOs is an alternative model that is transformative, one that offers an alternative to current norms in schooling institutions.

This model expressed by Ms. Janet allows the girls to “feel more comfortable and to feel more present” in the space. She encourages Sauti Yetu girls to communicate using whatever language they feel comfortable with and, in doing so, teachers negotiate the languages with students. In answering how schools may help African immigrant girls be academically successful, Ms. Janet expressed that “schools first have to deal with literacy.” She mentioned that this literacy need is not just for SIFE, ESL, or immigrant students, but for all American-born kids who struggle not only to read but to understand the text. However, she particularly highlighted the advantage of African immigrant girls, noting that

what African immigrant girls can bring to the table are their multiple languages—and really understanding that [African girls] really understand more than one language, and we can use them as a resource, and they should be utilized and a privileged space—having spoken more than one language. One is just attending to literacy, and if you incorporate what African girls need in terms of literacy and in terms of multilingualism, that would positively influence any kid.

In addition to the GELI program, Sauti Yetu provides services to African women and their families, including a Children and Family Services and Violence Against Women and Girls program. The organization’s director’s philosophy for Sauti Yetu is to build up women’s voices by speaking in their language first. As seen in recent research on multilingualism (Olsen, 2008; Orellana, 2001, 2009; Suárez-Orozco, C., Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008), immigrants are more able to contribute to a new environment and culture when there are those in the community who can stand alongside them and give them the tools to navigate the community; in order to do so, the director, Lynn, believes in first starting with the women’s languages to build community: “The whole idea is we will strengthen you, and help you, and build you up so that you don’t need us anymore. Even next time when something happens to you, you’d have had the tools enough to resolve it on your own, but we will always be here.”

In her own experiences, Lynn has seen that welcoming multiple languages has provided “comfort,” and women feel “strengthened and empowered when they walk into a space where the people not only look like [them], but they hear their language being spoken.” Since the mission of Sauti Yetu is to “give voice to our potential,” Lynn and her organization demonstrate that the use of multilingualism in an immigrant community is a gateway into welcoming them into CBOs; they honor the women’s multilingualism as an asset and generously welcome them into the space in order for women to begin the engagement with educational and social transformation when they first encounter the organization.

This concept of multilingualism as a means of critical literacy was continually highlighted as an asset in many of the Sauti Yetu classes and tutoring sessions. In 100% of the 47 observations, multiple languages could be heard within one session. The girls regularly spoke in French, Spanish, home dialects, and English to communicate within a

given class. When girls who had recently immigrated to the United States were introduced into the session, girls who had already picked up the English language would naturally translate for one another and encourage one another to speak English as often as possible.

One of the girls in the 2015-2016 class, Khady, came in with a limited grasp of the English language in September 2015, but because she was surrounded by her group of friends who regularly spoke to her in French, Wolof, and English, she indicated that she steadily improved, and this language development was “the happiest experience” of her year. In her interview, Khady expressed that she found common ground with girls who could speak in her language because they welcomed her into a community of women, leaders, and academic teachers:

I'm coming [*sic*] to America, like to school, before I don't speak English. I don't understand what the teacher say [*sic*]. I'm nervous...like I don't know what the teacher say. You understand? And I don't know what I [am] writing because I speak French and I write French and I write French before I'm coming [*sic*] to America. And I'm progress [*sic*] to now I speak a little bit English. Sauti Yetu help[ed] me, Ms. Alice [Sauti Yetu's college program coordinator], and my friends [in Sauti Yetu] help me...to explain what the teacher say [*sic*].

As indicated in the interview, Khady was able to express her learning through the English language, and she attributed her improvement to the work of Sauti Yetu. Although she attended an international high school, she did not feel confident in excelling in her content subjects or the English language until she found a community-based group of girls who could share in her experiences and her languages to help her succeed. By reflecting on how she had the ability to improve her English, she articulated how her community helped her to transform not only her skills, but also her confidence in succeeding academically and socially as a person and within her community.

Within seven months, Khady was able to perform her Performance-Based Assessment Test (PBAT), an oral presentation and exam on the core subjects, completely in English and received a competency score that reflected her expedited growth. Khady mentioned this significant improvement as the core reflection of her progress. She attributed her academic growth much to her community at Sauti Yetu, and the affordances of speaking French while learning the English language:

But Sauti Yetu help me, I'm very happy because...my first portfolio [PBAT]...I don't have the good grades. My grade [was] very bad, but the second portfolio is very good for me because I know I have competent [*sic*] and I'm happy because I have competence. Sauti Yetu helped me, you helped me, my friends...everybody help me. You don't know. I'm so happy.

Khady found community within Sauti Yetu and consistently went to afterschool tutoring to accelerate her learning. The welcoming of languages allowed her to excel academically by leveraging her assets with people who not only embraced her languages

but also supported her to learn new ones. Khady is an example of how Sauti Yetu promotes critical literacy in order to improve academic outcomes through leveraging multilingualism within its commitment to critical literacy.

### **“Bring Your Culture to This Place”: Multilingualism as a Gateway to Cultural Knowledge**

Secondly, the study found that fostering critical literacy leveraged multilingualism as a gateway to bridge cultural knowledge within local and global communities. In doing so, the study builds on sociocultural literacy theory in recognizing that participation and adaptation can be essential to learning and culture (Moll et al., 1992; Vygotsky, 1978). Findings showed that Sauti Yetu space contributes to the studies of Moll et al. (1992) and González et al (1995) on “funds of knowledge,” by allowing students to bring their home languages into the classroom for notions of classroom practice. In this way, Sauti Yetu’s literacy practices build upon González et al.’s (1995) argument that teachers ought to investigate the knowledge that students bring into the classroom.

For example, Ms. Janet’s recommendation that teachers should negotiate languages supports the research findings that schools should listen to and learn from the narratives of student community members (Rolón-Dow, 2005, Valenzuela, 1999). In bilingual and multilingual pedagogical literature, researchers have argued that pre-existing knowledge for ELLs is encoded in home languages and, therefore, the potential for cross-language transfer in the classroom is necessary and crucial for immigrant students (Cummins, 2001; Cummins & Schecter, 2003).

Ms. Janet’s invitation to bring in multiple languages was affirmed through the voices of girls in the group. In an interview with Ashaki, a student of Sauti Yetu from 2012-2015, she indicated that she spoke “Katacoli, Hausa, English, French, and a little bit of Ewe.” Ashaki emigrated from Togo to New York City in 2011 and was completing her last year as a member of Sauti Yetu in her senior year in the public high school. At the age of 19, Ashaki had adopted five languages: Katacoli, the language of Togo; Ewe, the language of the Lome; Hausa as a home dialect from Nigeria and Ghana; French as a national language; and English, which she learned when she arrived in America. Not only did Ashaki bring these languages into the Sauti Yetu classroom, but she also highlighted that she improved her French by being in the GELI girls group.

In asking about how she became a part of the Sauti Yetu GELI group, Ashaki discussed that when Sauti Yetu recruited at the school, she was invited to attend, and the reason she stayed was because Sauti Yetu invited multiple languages. She recognized that the alternative space allowed her to improve her French and engage in a way where she was understood in community:

It was in school, they came—an African girls group. I just went there once and I loved it. Like I could share stories and I could be comfortable with people like me...I could speak in French. Like when I speak in French and then you translate it to English...I’m so funny so whenever I say something in French that is funny, then they laugh. But when you translate in English, it is not that funny. Like I feel comfortable. And I practice my French more and more—because at home I don’t speak French. I practice my French more and more with my friends in GELI girls group. And also they help me remember my country, my culture, and

everything—and they also give you an opportunity to really bring your culture to this place and to really be proud of who you are.

In her first encounter with Sauti Yetu, Ashaki indicated that she felt “comfortable with people like [her]” particularly because they valued her language. In Ashaki’s instance, French provided her a way to forefront a part of her personality, her sense of humor, in a way that English could not. However, it is important to note that Ashaki’s French language skills were not developed or spoken at home; instead, she used the GELI space to improve a language she would not otherwise have learned. French was a *newly acquired* language for Ashaki; not only did she learn and speak English in GELI, but by developing friendships, Ashaki also learned the language of her peers.

Perhaps what is most significant about the assets of “inviting multiple languages in” was the way in which Ashaki’s ability to speak French freely allowed her to make friends in the GELI girls group—friendships that ended up fostering a community that grounded her cultural identity: “And also they help me remember my country, my culture, and everything—and they also give you an opportunity to really bring your culture to this place and to really be proud of who you are.” When asked what it meant to “remember [her] country and culture,” Ashaki recalled what it meant to “remember Africa.” In this act of “remembering Africa” and “bringing her culture to the place,” she was encouraged to bring her sisters into the end-of-year celebration, to celebrate not only her own life and work, but those of her family.

When visiting Sauti Yetu’s CBO site, one can often find children in the play area, and GELI regularly accommodates familial responsibilities during GELI events. For example, when hosting tutoring sessions or having events after school, GELI instructors regularly ask whether girls have babysitting requests for their own children or for their family members, recognizing that many of the girls in the GELI group have young children of their own or need to take care of multiple brothers and sisters. As demonstrated in both Brown et al.’s (2006) and Perry’s (2009) study on community-based practices, just as language is seen as inseparable from culture, familial culture is inseparable from the foundation of community-based practices. Through “bringing their culture to this place,” the girls found that they were able to build their own cultural assets while learning from the strengths of others to transform their individual and collective linguistic and leadership capabilities.

### **Sisterhood as a Critical Inquiry of Themselves and Their Community**

Lastly, this invitation of multiple languages allowed students to forge relationships through language, culture, and community. They were able to strengthen and transform their local and global communities through a critical inquiry of themselves and their community in what they termed “sisterhood.” For example, this notion was voiced in a focus group interview when Amadou mentioned that she was attracted to the GELI program because of “the idea of sisterhood.” As Chilisa and Ntseane (2010) indicated, the challenge in participatory methodology in interviewing and working with a group of women is not only to listen to the women’s voices and reveal cultural ideologies, but also to reveal a woman’s healing strategy for those who suffer oppression. In particular, I

noticed this healing strategy through the work of Sauti Yetu's invitation for women to talk openly and freely in class discussions. When I asked Amadou why she joined the program, she said: "I just liked the idea of sisterhood. It's something that I'm not used to. Personally, from where I grew up, girls were supposed to compete against each other in order to get a good husband. So that was the idea that I have in mind. So okay. I have to look more beautiful. I have to get more. . . . It was never about let me support another woman. So I never had that idea in my body when I came."

As Chilisa and Ntseane (2010) indicated in their study, this notion of support and sisterhood is particularly essential among African women; the researchers' participants even asked to use wooden spoons and baskets to guide the discussions instead of using a focus group facilitator. In the use of these objects, their participants also wanted to collectively "name and share the pain to envision strategies for resistance, reliance, and survival" (p. 629). Similarly, the GELI girls envisioned strategies together to share particular experiences, challenges, and joys as African immigrant girls in New York City schools. However, not only did the collective sharing lead to a community of sisterhood, but the act also encouraged the girls to lead one another. The notion that GELI girls were meant to "support another woman" encouraged Amadou to pursue leadership because she had never encountered a community of sisterhood where she could learn the values of women leadership and supporting women in community. In explaining how she transitioned herself into belonging in a community, Amadou stated:

I'm [was] going through transition and trying to find myself, knowing myself, but there are other sisters there. How can I just connect myself with those girls? Then I had a chance that I can talk about things that I'm mad for. . . . Then that's when I started doing Sauti Yetu GELI. I sat in on the meetings, and I just liked it. It was like I see someone share something, and I be like, "Yeah, I feel you. I've been through it. So we can make it." From there, I wanted to do more of sisterhood leadership . . . and I got involved with additional organizations and I did that since eleventh grade. (Focus group communication, February 26, 2016).

In finding community with the GELI girls and encouraging one another that "we can make it," Amadou developed the notion of sisterhood leadership, and she became an advocate for women's rights in the high school. She later on also became a peer mediator and applied to selected all-women's colleges in order to pursue this path. In addition to community, she also attributed this pursuit to Ms. Lydia's encouragement for her to read and write about her skills and talents in such ways as "If you had the power to change something, what would it be?" and with such assignments as "Write about someone who had inspired you." For Amadou and many others, GELI provided a sisterhood community that drew out their talents and skills and encouraged empowerment of self and others.

### **Implications for Leveraging Multilingualism as a Means for Critical Literacy**

Based on these observations and interviews, it is clear that Sauti Yetu's mission is to have African women and girls "bring their culture to this place," to "remember Africa," and to cultivate "sisterhood" while building the leadership and academic skills that allow girls to succeed in schools. Specifically, leveraging multilingualism to mobilize African immigrant girls is a foundational aspect and distinct mark of the alternative learning space that GELI provides for African immigrant girls. In doing so, African immigrant girls, whether new immigrants or seasoned seniors, hold onto the memory and kindness of how Sauti Yetu engaged in the girls' languages in order to foster their personal, professional, and academic growth.

Sauti Yetu's philosophy and mission were not only corroborated by the executive directors and teachers of GELI, but also reciprocally felt and appreciated by Sauti Yetu participants. This foundation has large implications for building girls' academic growth and leadership engagement in the community, demonstrating that this foundation has led to the success of the girls' college acceptances, leadership roles in extracurricular activities, engagement in social and racial justice, and high percentage growths in the school- and district-mandated Performance Based Assessment Tests (PBATs). Sauti Yetu's literacy practices show that "inviting their languages in" has become an invitation to build a strong foundation for the learning and development of immigrant girls.

The work of GELI's girls group fosters the ways in which such studies have argued for the rich and multilingual cultural assets that minority students bring into the classroom (Castaneda, 1997; Fránquiz, 2001; Mercado & Moll, 2001; Nieto, 1999; Rivera & Pedraza, 2000; Rolón-Dow, 2005). In order to leverage cultural assets within critical literacy, the organization structured their program around cultural needs to promote literacy for academic support for GELI students. This foundation of relevance is often reflected in community-based programming in which researchers, such as Ball (2000) and Lalik and Oliver (2007), explain that creative and flexible spaces "open [students] to something new" (Ball, 2000, p. 1020). By "inviting their languages in," students were able to open something new—to find how they could critically inquire themselves and their community through sustaining these relationships in educational alternative spaces.

### **Limitations of Study**

Although a qualitative case study design had been chosen with careful thought, there are limitations to this methodology. A case study design is context-based and, therefore, cannot be generalized. Although the study intended to engage in the notion of transferability for immigrant CBOs and immigrant youth, the study's first limitations rest on its context-based purpose—its significance in looking at the sociocultural norms of a particular organization, school, and population within a particular urban city. Lastly, this study stands from a critical paradigm due to its intention to look at social inequities and power within larger social norms. In doing so, the study maintains the idea that although the world is not directly knowable, meaning can be made through language and culture when perceived through historically-constructed power relationships. Nevertheless, I argue that there is significance in recognizing the implications of critical literacy among immigrant students, and such implications have immense possibilities for the fluid and intersectional work among CBOs, schooling institutions, and communities.

### Significance of Study

Overall, this study offers rich insights into how a CBO partnership with a New York City high school strengthens and supports the literacy development of an underserved immigrant population. This study is significant for three reasons relating to research, practice, and policy. First, the research contributes to a limited research base on African immigrant adolescent girls' engagement in literacy practices in urban communities. Second, the research explores how CBOs leverage multilingualism practices that are important for mobilizing immigrant girls to participate in local and global communities. Finally, the study offers critical implications for how teachers and teacher educators might reshape and redevelop the ways in which literacy is taught and negotiated among culturally and linguistically diverse students. In particular, this study demonstrates that the ways in which community-based organizations, such as Sauti Yetu, are empowering youth are the very means through which critical literacy is engaged in schooling institutions. By being a presence for immigrant girls and fostering their academic growth in schooling institutions, CBOs are meeting needs of immigrant students that schooling institutions are currently unable to meet.

As Zeichner, Bowen, Guillen, and Napolitan (2016) indicated in their article on engaging and working in solidarity with local families, teacher educators and teachers should work in solidarity with the community by engaging with and learning from the knowledge imparted by immigrant families. Specifically, teachers should participate in sustained engagement "for the purposes of transforming the curriculum and learning environment for both teacher education and K-12 schools" (p. 280). In order to do so, educators should also understand that "educational inequalities (e.g., opportunity/achievement gaps) are part and parcel of broad, deep, and racialized structural inequalities in housing, health, employment, and intergenerational transfers of wealth" (p. 279). Therefore, when CBOs such as Sauti Yetu empower students to participate in fighting against both educational and structural inequalities in their communities, they mobilize their teachers and peers to see the academic work done within and outside of schools as intertwined with the work that must be achieved in working toward structural equality. When educators empower students for academic learning and leadership such that they "invite their languages in," they empower their ability to transform and change their society and world.

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