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# Academic achievement and attitudes of Arab-American immigrants

Nour Fakhoury

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Academic Achievement and Attitudes of Arab-American Immigrants

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in

Sociology

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November 12, 2012

Ypsilanti, Michigan

## Dedication

To my husband: Issam for his continuous love and support.

To my children: Ibrahim, Ayyoub, and Zaina for lighting up my life.

## Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge my committee chair, Dr. Kristine Ajrouch, for her guidance, advice, and support throughout all the phases of my thesis. Her commitment to my success was apparent and it is very much appreciated. I would also like to thank her for giving me the opportunity to gain extensive first-hand experience in qualitative data analysis which helped me immensely with my own thesis. Also I would like to acknowledge my committee member Dr. Solange Simoes for her guidance and advice. I thank her for her comments and feedback, which helped me tremendously. I would like to acknowledge all those who participated in this study and helped me recruit participants; this study wouldn't have been possible without them.

In addition, I would like to thank my father, who piqued my interest in many social and political issues at a young age, and my mother, whose endless encouragement and support strengthens me. Also, I would like to thank my brother, for his lifetime of love and support.

Finally and most importantly, I would like to thank my husband for his patience and support. He encouraged me to follow my interests when I was in doubt, and for that I am so grateful. His work ethic and life insights have taught me invaluable lessons and continue to teach and motivate me every day.

## Abstract

There is no single predictor of economic success in modern America more than one's education level. There has been much empirical research examining immigrant students and academic achievement, in order to provide the necessary support to increase the likelihood of academic success. However, there has been little research to investigate the case of Arab-American immigrants. The influx of immigrants from Arab countries that have recently experienced much instability due to war and conflict, and the increased negative visibility of Arabs post-September 11, make it vital to examine the experiences of Arab immigrant students and how their experiences affect their academic achievement.

This qualitative study consisted of 17 participants, ages 17-28, from the Detroit and Chicago metropolitan areas. One-on-one, face-to-face interviews lasting 20-45 minutes were conducted. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed in order to find recurring themes.

Experiences with respect to discrimination and marginalization, parental involvement, and experiences in country of origin and their effects on academic achievement were examined. Results suggest that although discrimination and marginalization were often experienced, these did not affect students' academic achievement. In fact, the findings suggest that it may have pushed the students to work harder at learning the language to ensure faster integration into mainstream culture. In addition, the challenges that parents may face vis-à-vis parental involvement, in particular, the financial struggles, may affect the students' academic achievement. Finally, advanced math and science curriculum that the immigrant students had been

exposed to in their countries of origin may indeed play a major role in boosting the student's academic confidence and academic achievement in the U.S.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Educational achievement is an important indicator of social and economic mobility. Ensuring that all students receive quality education is important to the future of the student as well as the nation. In the United States today, immigrants are arriving in record numbers. In recent years, there have been an increasing number of studies that have examined immigrants in the educational system. Nevertheless, few have examined the case of Arab immigrants and educational attainment. Whether the findings on immigrants and educational achievement in general would coincide with Arab immigrants is unknown. Their case may have unique aspects in light of the consistently negative portrayal of Arabs in the media, particularly post-9/11. Since discrimination encountered during childhood can create negative feelings about the educational system (Shields & Behrman 2004), it is very important to consider what this group of young immigrants is encountering in order to provide necessary support to these students.

If indeed Arab immigrant students feel marginalized, it is vital to examine how that affects their attitudes and performance in the school system. Educators can create intervention programs that will help children deal with whatever challenges they might be facing and thus improve their well-being in the school and educational achievement (ADRC 2003).

There are other barriers that could stand in the way of immigrants obtaining high academic achievement. For example, research has shown that when parents are involved, students report higher grades, test scores, graduation rates, and attendance; in addition, it also increases student motivation (Michigan DOE 2001). However, immigrant parents often face language and cultural barriers that stand in their way of becoming more

involved in their child's education (ADRC 2003). They may not be able to read or understand school documents or interact with their children's teachers. Even if documents are translated, parents coming from a different country and different system may not know the ways in which they can become involved in their children's education (ADRC 2003).

In addition, parents of immigrant students lead very busy lives trying to provide for their families. Parents often have low wage jobs and must therefore work many hours (Cruz 2009). This could stand in their way of attending parent/teacher conferences and providing their children with the needed support (Ramirez 2003). Lack of social capital due to lack of interaction between parents and teachers and other parents may also stand in the way of them obtaining important information regarding their children's education (Turney & Kao 2009).

Experiences in country of origin may also affect the student's academic achievement. Examining those experiences and understanding how those experiences affect academic achievement are also important. The challenges that students face during the immigration process, such as leaving family members behind, or negative experiences in their country of origin, such as war and conflict, may affect their well-being and in turn their academic achievement. Therefore, this study will examine experiences of Arab immigrants in their countries of origin as well as experiences in U.S. schools and the difficulties that they may face in school, particularly when it comes to discrimination and/or marginalization. Parental involvement and the barriers that their parents face will also be discussed. Finally, all of the above will be considered in examining academic achievement of Arab American immigrant students.

### *Purpose and Objectives of Study*

The purpose of this study is to understand the Arab immigrant students' experience and how it affects their educational achievement and help shed light on necessary interventions to help improve their experiences. Although previous studies have examined immigrants and educational achievement, the case of Arab immigrants is unique, especially post-9/11. Due to recent events in the Arab world such as war in the region, economic hardships, and rise of religious, ethnic, and sectarian tensions, many fled their homelands and arrived in the U.S. in hopes of finding security, the promise of opportunity, and a better life. There has been an influx of immigrants from Arab countries since 1990. From Iraq alone, for example, the first and second invasions by the United States led as many as 30,000 Iraqis to immigrate to the U.S (Semple 2009). These immigrants have unique needs since they have suffered through economic deprivation, due to sanctions imposed on Iraq, and suffered trauma due to war. Another example is the intifada uprising in 2000 which also led many Palestinians to immigrate to the United States (Abdel-Hady 2007). They too have suffered the hardships of war and need special attention when it comes to social services and education.

While these events increased the number of people who either need or have a great desire to immigrate to the U.S., post-9/11 brought with it an increase in negative images of Arabs and Muslims by the American media, causing a negative sentiment from the general American public. The visible marginalization of Arabs and Muslims post-9/11 and “us” vs. “them” logic (Jamal & Naber 2008) may create a problematic adaptation for new immigrants. There has been general agreement by writers on this topic that Arabs and Arab Americans have experienced increased marginalization since 9/11

(Jamal & Naber 2008). Despite this, the number of immigrants from the Arab world has not decreased post-9/11 (Kayyali 2006). Nevertheless, negative images and feelings about Arabs and Muslims raise concerns about the reception of these immigrants by the United States.

Immigration, in general, is stressful on a family, and recent research has shown that it creates an enormous amount of stress on children as well. Lack of extended family network and friendships that they had in their homeland, lack of familiarity, and having to learn a new language and culture all contribute to their stress (McCarthy 2007). Coming to a world where they feel discriminated against and rejected poses additional stress. Since school is where these young immigrants spend most of their time, discrimination encountered in the school will create negative feelings about the educational system (Abada, Hou & Ram 2008). Therefore, it is important to consider how discrimination and the feeling that they are part of a marginalized “other” group affect their educational achievement and attitudes on education.

Approximately 26% of the total U.S. population reported foreign birth around the year 2010 (ACS 2012). Therefore, it is vital for immigrant youth to receive proper attention and education in order for them to reach their full potential. Understanding their culture and circumstances before their entry to the United States and understanding their situation in the schools is important in order to address these issues and provide the proper education and appropriate services, when needed. The findings from the current study will shed light on whether recent Arab immigrant students encounter discrimination at school and will document factors that affect their academic achievement. The proposed study also aims to explore the circumstances they faced prior to arriving in the United

States, which may also influence their educational attainment. Such information will provide important insight as to how these students can be helped.

A substantial amount of evidence shows that one of the key factors to a student's success in school is parental involvement (Advocates for Children of New York 2004). Parents of immigrant students may speak little or no English and therefore have a difficult time accessing their child's education. This study will examine parental involvement and the types of barriers that may exist for this immigrant group in the Detroit and Chicago Metropolitan areas. Studying such issues as discrimination, parental involvement, and experiences in the country of origin among Arab immigrant youth will help in the understanding of their specific experiences.

#### *Research Questions*

The goal of this study is to examine the experiences and attitudes of immigrant Arab American students and their academic achievement. The following research questions attempt to take a closer look at what these students found to be challenging and what they found to be positive about being an Arab immigrant student in the U.S.

Specifically:

1. Do Arab American students feel discriminated against and/or marginalized in school by peers, teachers, or administrators? And if so, how does that affect their academic achievement?
2. Does lack of English language skills, resources, and knowledge of the school system affect parental involvement? And if so, how does parental involvement affect their academic achievement?

3. Do experiences, in particular educational experiences in country of origin affect academic achievement in the U.S.?

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

It is vital to understand the Arab American immigrant experience from a historical context. Understanding the obstacles and barriers that this group of immigrants had to face upon immigration will contribute to the understanding of their situation in the United States today. Contributing further to the understanding of their experiences would be an examination of the identity of Arab American immigrant youth. Immigrant adolescents in general face many issues when it comes to identity when adapting to a new place and culture (Phinney et al. 2001; Schwartz, Montgomery and Briones 2006). Finally, there is very little literature on Arab American immigrants and academic achievement; therefore, the literature on other immigrants and academic achievement will be examined in order to shed light on how immigrant students fare when it comes to academics in the new land and what the findings have been thus far.

### *History of Arab Immigration*

From the original colonizers to the slaves brought against their will, to the most recent immigrants that have come seeking a better life, immigration has shaped the makeup of the United States and its history. Different immigration policies throughout the years have allowed immigration from certain parts of the world while restricting others, which along with different economic and political issues in the countries of origin dictated where and when the immigrants came from and shaped the immigrant experience. The immigrants who are still referred to by scholars as the “new immigrants” came between the 1880s and the WWI period and originated from Southern and Eastern Europe. They experienced much of the same reception from American society as those immigrants who came from Arab countries (Aswad 1996). They not only came from

different cultures and spoke different languages but also practiced different religions. Judaism, Catholicism, and later Islam brought another aspect to differentiate the immigrants and consequently create new levels of xenophobia, prejudice, and discrimination. In recent decades and especially after the 9/11 attacks, Islam has received a great deal of negative attention from the media and the American public in general. Since the words *Arab* and *Muslim* are very often mistakenly used synonymously, Muslims and Arabs alike faced prejudice and negative stereotyping. At the same time, there has been a surge of immigrants from the Arab world due to political and economic instability in the region.

Arab immigrants came in two waves, and each group migrated with different motives, educational backgrounds, and from different areas in the Arab world; all these aspects significantly shaped their experiences (Aswad 1996; McCares 1994). This review will examine the experience of Arab Americans. More specifically, their immigration history (including motives for migration, national and ethnic backgrounds, as well as the adjustments and dilemmas), development of identity, and the education of immigrant youth, all of which determine the future of Arab-Americans.

During the period that the first Arabs came to America, which was in the 1880s until WWI, the Arab world was under Ottoman rule, and the first to arrive were men from Mount Lebanon, which was at the time experiencing a great deal of economic prosperity and enjoyed stability and security (McCarus 1994; Ajrouch & Jamal 2007). However, the immigrants were attracted to the industrialization and urbanization in the United States and its need for laborers (McCarus 1994). Most of the first to arrive from the Arab region were uneducated, unskilled, Christian men who came on temporary bases in hopes of

making a fortune and returning to their homeland (Aswad 1996). However, conditions back home changed following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the British and French colonization of their homeland. Consequently, these immigrants never returned. Rather, they sent for their families to join them and became permanent residents of the United States (Aswad 1996).

Their plan to be temporary citizens kept these early Arab immigrants from getting involved in domestic politics; rather, they were concerned with the politics of their countries and villages of origin (Suleiman 1999). After the First World War, the number of immigrants from the Arab region began to diminish due to the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924. In an attempt to restrict the immigration of people from certain areas, a quota system was set, allowing only 100 Syrians to enter annually (McCares 1994). In 1965, however, when the laws were reversed, the second wave of immigration from the Arab region began. However, this group of immigrants differed greatly from the first wave (Aswad 1996; McCares 1994). Many of them were educated or came in order to further their education. They were politically sophisticated and brought with them a sense of Arab identity which laid the foundation for their political activism. This is also the time when Muslim Arabs began arriving in large numbers. Until WWII, 90-95% of Syrian immigrants from Mount Lebanon were Christian, and the rest were Muslim and Druze (McCarus 1994).

After WWII, immigrants came from Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Palestine. Palestinians were fleeing the Israeli occupation while the Syrians and Iraqis wanted to escape the socialist regimes in their homeland. Unlike earlier immigrants, they knew they wanted to stay permanently and thus invested the time and money to establish institutions

(Aswad 1996). The political involvement and establishment of institutions, which provided a forum for Arab issues and represented the community, proved to be vital after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The U.S. support for Israel, the one-sided media coverage in support of Israel, and the portrayal of Arabs in a negative light brought stronger feelings of Arab-American identity (Aswad 1996; McCarus 1994). People shifted from identifying themselves as Syrian-American or Palestinian-American and began to identify as Arabs or Arab-Americans, as one unified group. The flood of Palestinian refugees into neighboring Arab countries made the Israeli occupation of Palestine the problem of many Arab states. Many of the new Arab immigrants had seen firsthand the injustices that Israel was committing against the Palestinian people when the refugees flooded their countries. The negative portrayal of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict by the American media caused older and younger Arab activists to unite in order for them to overcome this bias, discrimination, and attempts by the Zionist groups in America to exclude Arab-Americans (McCarus 1994).

The second wave of Arab immigrants also consisted of political refugees and those escaping from the political unrest in their countries. From regional conflicts such as the Iran-Iraq War and Gulf War to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the civil wars in Lebanon and Yemen, many were leaving involuntarily to seek political stability (Abdel-Hady 2007). The Gulf War alone produced many refugees; in 2007, the number of Iraqi refugees was estimated to be from 16,000 to 21,000 (Jamil, Nassar-McMillan, & Lambert 2007).

Refugees have a unique experience; they have witnessed the horrors of war, economic deprivation, and in some cases a disruption in their family structure. Many

have had to leave family members behind, which may cause additional stress and worry about the family members who may be in the face of danger. They may also experience grief at the loss of their homeland and maintain hope to return one day when the possibility is quite unlikely (Jamil et al. 2007).

Posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety will cause difficulty for this group to become accustomed to their new country and new way of life. They are more likely to keep their ethnic traditions and beliefs than immigrants who voluntarily made the voyage. They have difficulty and lack of desire to invest time in learning the new system and new language, for they did not seek the “American dream”; their migration to America was merely an alternative to a horrific living situation. The belief that their stay is only temporary further discourages them from learning the language and ways of their new society.

More recent Arab immigrants, including refugees, suffer from many disadvantages. Their lack of knowledge of the system and language barriers keep many from attaining jobs and improving their socioeconomic status, which can be a major stressor (Jamil et al. 2007). In addition, this group is more likely to face discrimination since they have characteristics that identify them as part of the world that the terrorists of 9/11 are from. This further complicates the assimilation process for these Arab immigrants.

While the most recent immigrants or refugees face much discrimination, they are not the only group of Arabs that do. Arab Americans have also suffered an enormous amount of hatred and profiling after the 9/11 attacks by the American public and government alike (Cainkar 2009). The government’s rhetoric after the 9/11 attacks gave

the impression that all Arabs and Muslims living in the United States are somehow connected to terrorism. Arabs and Muslims in the United States became “them” and thus not part of the American nation (Cainkar 2009). One study found that the majority of Arab Americans felt fearful of government policies at time and were concerned about their safety (Cainkar 2009, 14). Many studies supported the findings that Middle Easterners and South Asians were treated as if they were a special population and thus certain civil rights did not apply to them (Cainkar 2009; Kampf & Sen 2007; Jamal and Naber 2008).

### *Development of Identity*

“We begin to conceptualize matters of identity at the very time in history when they become a problem” (Erikson 1950). It was Erik Erikson, an immigrant, who first raised the concept of identity (Huseby-Darvas 1994). For Arab Americans, when the United States supported Israeli aggression and when bias started forming against them is when they began to conceptualize their ethnic identity. The feeling of belonging to a group increased their sense of pride and made it easier to deal with prejudice and hatred. However, as their identity became more visible, the adherence to it made Arab Americans easier targets of hatred and prejudice (McCarus 1994). While the bias witnessed after this period gave birth to Arab-American identity (Aswad 1996; McCarus 1994), the group from this wave of immigration wasn’t the first to deal with these dilemmas.

Much like the immigrants who came from Southern and Eastern Europe, the first Arab immigrants who arrived before WWI faced rejection from mainstream society and encountered anti-Arab discrimination. Only whites were able to attain citizenship, and

since the first Arabs were from the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire, they were mistakenly classified as Turks and thus Asian. Later, Arabic-speaking immigrants were classified as Syrians but still considered Asian. The Syrian community protested court decisions that classified them as such. Historical and genealogical evidence was presented in order to prove that Arabs belonged to the Semitic branch of the Caucasian race (Suleiman 1999). Although they were considered part of the majority race, they never felt like full-fledged citizens of U.S. society (McCarus 1994).

It is important to examine how Arab Americans define themselves and whether they identified with being “white” or “other” throughout their short history in the U.S. and, more importantly, whether or not that identification has shifted post-9/11. In a study conducted prior to 9/11, Ajrouch & Kusow (2007), using data from 30 Lebanese immigrant parents from the South of Lebanon who arrived in the U.S. between the 1970s and the mid-1980s, found that “whiteness” was embraced. In Lebanon, Shi’a Muslims hold minority status and are not given much power or privilege (Ajrouch & Kusow 2007). After coming to America they became part of the privileged majority race. Thus they embrace “whiteness” in order to position themselves on top of the social hierarchy (Jamal & Naber 2008).

Since prejudice, discrimination, and a decreased level of safety are associated with being part of a minority group, many have a strong desire to identify with the majority race. However, a study conducted in the Chicago land area in attempt to find how Arabs view themselves in the racial structure found different results. Sixty-three percent of respondents said that Arabs are not white, while 20% said that Arabs are white and the responses from the remainder were too ambiguous (Jamal & Naber 2008). It is

interesting to see the differences that exist between people who arrive from different areas in the Arab world, those who possess different status, or those who arrive to different areas in the new country (Aswad 1996). Although since the study that included the Lebanese Shi'a Muslims was conducted prior to 9/11, it is unknown whether or not Arab Americans post-9/11 experienced marginalization and thus no longer identify with "whiteness" and now consider themselves the "other." In other words, are the findings different because Lebanese Shi'a Muslims were a minority in Lebanon? Or was it because the study was conducted prior to 9/11, whereas the study of Arabs in the Chicago-land area was conducted post-9/11?

In another study Ajrouch and Jamal (2007) use data from the Detroit Arab American Study, which represents Arab and Chaldean adults who resided in Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties between July and December of 2003, to study how certain ethnic traits influence whether individuals identify as "white" (Ajrouch & Jamal 2007). More specifically, country of origin, religion, immigration status, and using the identification "Arab American" are examined to find whether they influence the adherence to a "white" identity. Results showed that those who originate from Syria, Lebanon, or Palestine are more likely to identify as white than individuals from Yemen or Iraq. It was also found that Muslims are less likely than Christians to identify as white. In addition, those who arrived after 1990 are less likely to identify as white. There was also a negative association between white identity and the Arab American label. This study also found that age and education were positively associated with white identity. The older and more educated are more likely to identify as white (Ajrouch & Jamal 2007).

Age differences also exist when it comes to the political identity of Arab-Americans today. Results from questionnaires completed by 161 politically active Arab Americans suggest that younger Arab American activists are twice as likely, 38%, as older colleagues, 18%, to feel that their opponents highlight the activist's Arab background. Also the younger the activist is, the more likely he or she is to seek support from his or her ethnic community. Older activists claim that they are less likely to experience discrimination or negative propaganda (McCarus 1994).

It is difficult to identify whether religion plays a role in the older generation identifying as white and reporting that they face less discrimination than the younger generation. Since Christians arrived in the United States prior to Muslims, and since it has been found that Christians are more likely to identify as "white" than Muslims, it might be that the older generation simply has a higher concentration of Christians than the younger generation. Unlike Arab Muslims, Arab Christians don't have an "other" when it comes to religion (Ajrouch & Kusow 2007). They will actually use their Christianity to differentiate themselves from the Arab Muslims and find a commonality with the dominant race (Haddad 1994).

However, Eastern Christianity differs greatly from Western Christianity, for it has many rituals that are unfamiliar to Westerners. Missionaries who went into the Muslim world in hopes of converting Muslims to Christianity later shifted their focus to the Christians when they found themselves unsuccessful at converting Muslims (Haddad 1994). They were intolerant of the practices of the Eastern Churches and wanted to impose not only their religious beliefs but also cultural practices and norms (Haddad 1994). Although Arab Christians thought to use their Christianity to fit into American

society, here in the U.S., western Churches have a negative attitude towards the Arab Christians, which is why the Arab Christians have not assimilated well into the western churches. Even the Protestants who arrived in the U.S. were given their own congregations under the excuse that they wanted these ethnic groups to have communication with one another (Haddad 1994).

This has led to segregation and also created feelings of “otherness” among certain Christian Arabs. On the other hand, it has certainly helped preserve cultural beliefs and customs. Similarly, Islamic institutions and mosques have been beneficial to the Arab Muslim community. They attract many Muslim Arabs who can get together and help preserve the Arab culture. Having a support system available through the church or mosque can certainly be helpful when trying to raise children in a society so different from the society of the country of origin. These small communities can also offer the child some comfort when dealing with the conflicting ideologies of the two worlds they belong to. Socializing with other children who are facing the same dilemmas, as well as having a community to belong to, can bring a sense of pride and make parents and children more comfortable (McCarus1994).

Different cultural practices here in the United States continue to be a dilemma for parents since certain practices go against the cultural beliefs. Many practices that are considered appropriate in U.S. society are considered immoral in Arab societies (McCarus 1994). Arab-American immigrant parents worry about their children getting involved with drugs or other things that they see are more widespread in the U.S. than in their native homeland. The Arab viewpoint on females also greatly differs from that of American society. As the keeper of the family honor, females’ conduct is very important

in Arab culture (Ajrouch 2004; Al-Azhari Sonbol 2003). Females from Arab countries face more restriction than males, which shapes their experience as immigrants.

Cainkar (1994) examines the case of Palestinian women and discusses the fact that they struggle with the anti-assimilation burden more so than Palestinian men. Behaving appropriately in public and abiding by the cultural norms are viewed as much more important for females than for males (Cainkar1994), making it more difficult for Arab women to assimilate to mainstream American culture. Even second-generation Arab American adolescents view the role of the Arab American female as one aspect that differentiates Arab Americans from the white identity (Ajrouch 2004).

### *Immigrant Youth and Education*

After examining Arab history and identity for the purpose of understanding the Arab immigrant experiences, shifting to the review of literature on immigrants and academic achievement will assist in understanding the trials and tribulations that immigrants, in general, face upon arriving in the U.S. Considering the education of immigrant youth is vital since education leads to social and economic mobility and improves the condition of immigrants and their families. School is one of the most important if not the most important institution that is called upon for the assistance of immigrant students to adjust and fully integrate into the new society (McDonnell & Hill 1993). There are a great number of immigrant students entering U.S. schools. These immigrants come from diverse backgrounds and thus experienced different circumstances and have different reasons for coming to the U.S. Some have suffered trauma due to war and political unrest or have experienced economic deprivation and are now in an

unfamiliar country where they have to learn a new language and become accustomed to a new way of life.

Despite their need to learn the language, policymakers at the state and federal level have not handled immigrants, in general, based on their unique needs. Immigrant education is associated with bilingual education, while other needs of students such as their status as newcomers and the difficult circumstances that they may have suffered are seldom recognized. Although educators and administrators who work with immigrant children may help the children address many of their issues, the lack of policy and funding leaves many immigrant students without easy access to education, health, and social support needed to cope with the issues of leaving one culture and adjusting to a new one (McDonnell & Hill 1993). Education for these children is vital and thus it is important to examine what influences the differences in educational achievement among immigrants. The studies that will be discussed below have examined how differences between first and second generation immigrants, the motivation for migration, financial and human capital, and generational group differences can affect educational attainment.

Immigration can be difficult and cause strain on all family members; however, children's lives are impacted greatly by migration, whether their parents' reasons for migrating stemmed from economic desperation or whether the new immigrant parents are educated and financially secure. Twenty percent of all children under 18 in the United States are children of immigrants (Hagelskamp, Hughes, & Suarez-Orozco 2010), and while U.S.-born children of immigrant parents have an advantage over immigrant children, the former are still affected greatly by their parents' immigrant status.

Immigrant parents might lack awareness due to language and cultural barriers, which can put their kids at a disadvantage (Hagelskamp et al. 2010).

Having to get accustomed to a new and unfamiliar country, where a different language is spoken and a different culture is practiced, can prove to be very difficult for the parents who have to ensure survival for themselves and their children, and thus children, especially preschoolers, are not given the appropriate amount of attention by their parents. Small children receive even less and less attention; 3- to 4-year old children of immigrant parents are at increased risk of developmental delays (Hagelskamp et al. 2010). Immigrant children at this age don't attend preschool; rather the parents make arrangements with a relative to watch the preschooler. As mentioned earlier, lack of resources and awareness play a role in why these children don't attend preschool (Hagelskamp et al. 2010).

Education in the last half-century has been really important in determining well-being and social mobility. From better health to greater economic stability, education has brought about better opportunities that improve the general quality of life for individuals (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 2010). For immigrant children, school plays a very important role in integrating them into American society. It is their first experience in the new society. They not only learn the formal curriculum but also the cultural idioms and codes from the friends they make. Immigrant children also rely heavily on the assistance of teachers, guidance counselors, and coaches at the school to guide them through and provide them with the necessary information for them to do well in school. This can also play a vital role if a student has a desire to obtain higher education and does not have the necessary resources to do so (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 2010).

It is important that the experience in school for immigrant children is a positive one. Lack of proficiency in the language accompanied with lack of instruction leads to less success for the student, and the start of school sets the stage for how the child feels about school and his or her academic achievement long-term. The likelihood of a child not finishing school increases when he or she gets a poor start (Portes 1999). In the case of Arab Americans, although they are legally considered “white,” they often experience prejudice and marginalization, which makes it difficult for them to develop a positive personal identification (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 2010). If the school fails to provide the immigrant child with a positive experience and thus the child starts to feel like an “outsider,” it could ultimately influence his or her experience as an immigrant in a negative way.

Recent longitudinal studies (Suarez-Orozco, Gytan, Pakes, Bang, O’Connor, and Rhodes, 2008; Szalacha, Marks, Lamarre, & Garcia-Coll (2005) found that over 50% of first-generation immigrant students had below average or failing grades or decline in overall academic achievement through middle and high school. Second-generation immigrants, however, tend to have equal or higher academic achievement than third or fourth generation immigrants (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 2010). It is important to examine the reasons for migration when looking at the academic adjustment of immigrant youth. Parental educational expectations and aspirations are commonly studied in hopes of finding how it affects academic success or failure. The findings from studies on immigrants and children of immigrant students mentioned above suggest some complexity. Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco (2010) studied whether the migration motivations were more for education purposes or for employment and job purposes.

They studied 309 recently arrived immigrants from Mexico, China, Central America, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. The participants were recruited from San Francisco and Boston public schools. The schools provided them access to students, teachers, staff, and school records. Since in the past quantitative studies have not done an adequate job explaining the relationship between motivations of immigration and student academic achievement, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in this study. Parents of the students were given questions with different formats: open-ended, fill in the blank, and Likert-type scale. Also students' GPAs were obtained to find how motivations of migration affect them. Findings suggest that salience of educational opportunities as a motivation for migration versus salience of employment opportunities result in higher GPA for immigrant students and higher academic achievement. However, it was found that migrating for employment reasons was more salient than that of education among most immigrants. Country differences also exist; education among immigrants from China was a more salient motivation for migrating (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 2010).

The educational achievement of immigrants is affected by many factors. Studies have shown substantial group differences where certain groups consistently have a better performance than others. One study on immigrants in Canada examined the financial and human capital, family structure, community resources, and cultural relations, as well as external factors such as racial stratification and economic opportunity when it comes to the educational attainment of immigrants (Abada, Hou & Ram 2008). Highly educated parents not only have the financial resources but also the knowledge and awareness to invest in their children's abilities at a young age which puts them on the right track and

greatly increases their chances at better academic performance and university education (Abada et al. 2008). While parental human capital plays a vital role, group differences do suggest that social capital in the family and immigrant community also play a major role in the educational attainment of student immigrants and children of immigrants.

Immigrant students within certain ethnic groups that have solidarity and a strong community also succeed in the educational system. Their bilingualism provides them with greater access to community networks, encouragement, and effective communication with their parents, and this gives them the resources to succeed in the school system. When the ethnic community works together and all adults supervise the children of the community, it decreases delinquent behavior. This has been specifically found among Vietnamese children (Bankston and Zhou 1997). Many ethnic groups involve their children in supplementary education where they learn the language of their homeland, culture, and family values, and this creates an opportunity for immigrant children and children of immigrants to receive and give support and learn about and from other children that may come from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The information and resources that children with higher socioeconomic background have can be shared with those of lower socioeconomic background, who wouldn't otherwise have a way of obtaining it (Abada et al. 2008).

However, solidarity can also prove to have negative influences on the integration of immigrants and their children for those groups that are at the bottom of the social and economic stratum. Entrapment in a lower socioeconomic community can make it difficult to achieve social and economic upward mobility. Also, groups that encounter discrimination during childhood have a higher likelihood of having negative feelings

toward the educational system, which provides them with a reason to abandon academic activity that would lead to downward assimilation (Abada et al. 2008). Discrimination against the visible minority also hinders certain immigrants from advancing in the educational system. The results from this study show that children of immigrant parents have a clear advantage when it comes to university completion, since they had significantly higher rates than children of Canadian-born parents. Among immigrant groups there are also great group differences when it comes to educational attainment. The educational level of both parents, living in an urban area rather than a rural area or small town, and living with both biological parents versus a single mother all affect the rates of university completion (Abada et al. 2008).

Rumbaut (2004) examined educational and occupational attainment among first- and second-generation immigrants and how arriving at different ages and life stages influence academic achievement. Foreign-born adolescents, elementary school children, and pre-school children are at very different life stages at the point of immigration, and they begin their social adaptation in different social contexts (Rumbaut 2004). Warner and Srole, in 1945, distinguished between the first-generation immigrants, the parental generation and referred to it as P1, and the second-generation, the U.S. born offspring, as F1. They further differentiated the foreign born by defining those who arrived age 18 or older as P1 and those arriving above the age of 18 as P2. Rumbaut coined the term 1.5 generation to refer to P2. He further redefines P2 in what Oropeza and Landale (1997) referred to as “decimal” generations. Those who entered the country during early childhood (0-5 years old) are the 1.75 generation; middle childhood (6-12) are the 1.5 generation; and adolescence (13-17) are referred to as 1.25 generation. The U.S.-born

offspring, second-generation is also further redefined as 2.0 generation, where both parents are foreign-born, and 2.5, where one parent is foreign-born while the other is U.S.-born (Rumbaut 2004).

Immigrants who arrive during early childhood, 1.75 generation, are too young to have received much schooling in their homeland and thus have not learned how to read and write in their parents' language. They usually don't have much memory of their birth country and thus have a lot in common with the 2.0 generation, those who are born in the U.S. to immigrant parents. They acquire the language quickly upon attending school and speak English with no accent (Rumbaut 2004). Immigrants who arrive during middle childhood, 1.5 generation, learned or began to learn reading and writing in the mother tongue, but their education is completed here. Immigrants who arrive during their adolescence, the 1.25 generation, resemble the 1.0 generation; they may or may not immigrate with their families. They may either finish secondary school in the U.S. or join the workforce immediately upon arrival, depending on their age.

There are stark differences between these generational cohorts when it comes to educational and occupational attainment and language outcomes (Rumbaut 2004). Other variables, however, also influence each cohort's achievements. For the 1.0 generation, there are huge differences between high and low socioeconomic status (SES). Those with high SES have a rate of 56% of college graduation, while those with low SES have a 9% college graduation rate. It was also found that low-SES and mid-SES immigrant groups both experience upward educational mobility, while high SES immigrants tend to maintain the same level of education attainment among 1.0 to 2.0 immigrants. Findings for occupational attainment, however, have been different, showing a general pattern of

occupational advancement across all groups of generational cohorts from first- to second-generation. Even among high SES groups, occupational gains are shown. The only group showing a slight dip in occupational advancement is the 2.5 group (Rumbaut 2004). The 1.25 cohorts, those who enter at age 13-17 years of age, tend to do worse or at least no better than the 1.0 generation, both educationally and occupationally. Evidence shows that members of the 1.25 generation may experience more problematic adaptation than the 1.5 and 1.75 immigrants who arrive at an earlier age (Rumbaut 2004).

This cross-generational analysis has shown that generally when immigrants arrive at an earlier age, it increases the likelihood of doing better both educationally and occupationally. While this is the general finding, many other aspects play a role, such as socioeconomic status, education level of parents, migration flows, condition of their reception by the host country, and the immigrant group to which they belong (Rumbaut 2004). As discussed briefly above, solidarity with one's ethnic group can be beneficial to educational performance, except for groups that are at the bottom of the social ladder (Abada, Hou & Ram 2008).

Many studies have been conducted on immigrants and educational attainment. However, there is not much literature discussing the academic experiences of Arab immigrant students although their experiences may be unique since these immigrants are coming from areas where war and conflict are prevalent in addition to arriving in the U.S. in a period when incidence of hatred and discrimination against Arabs and Muslims is on the rise due to 9/11. The negative media portrayals and stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims may pose additional challenges for these newcomers. Therefore, it is vital that the situation of Arab immigrant students be examined in order to investigate what types of

challenges they might be facing and if these challenges are standing in their way of achieving higher academic achievement. According to previous studies, students who receive little support in the academic setting and are not well integrated in mainstream society end up being among the lowest achievers (Portes 1999). Therefore, studies that specifically examine Arab immigrants will provide necessary information in order to improve the quality of their educational experience, and this could lead to an improved overall experience for Arab immigrant students.

Therefore, in this study there will be a major focus on marginalization and discrimination of Arab immigrants, especially post-9/11. Earlier studies have shown that discrimination and lack of integration into mainstream society can cause negative feelings and personal identification. Discrimination in schools can thus lead to lower educational performance and negative attitudes toward the educational system (Portes 1999). Consequently, many Arab immigrants might perform poorly in school due to this. If challenges are addressed, these students will have a higher likelihood of performing better academically and have higher educational and occupational attainment.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

#### *Sample and Design*

Participants in this study include Arab Americans aged 17-28 in the Detroit Metropolitan and the Chicago-land areas. The Detroit Metropolitan area is home to the largest concentration of Arab Americans in the United States (Howell 2000). Arab immigration to this area started approximately in the 1880s. The immigrants consisted mostly of Christian men from Mount Lebanon in the Ottoman province of Syrian (Howell and Shryock 2003). Syrians started to arrive in increasing numbers in 1914, and many settled in Dearborn, lured by Henry Ford's \$5 a day for an 8-hour day (Ameri and Lockwood 2001). The flow of immigration continued; even in times of recession, Arab immigrants continued to come to Detroit due the presence of other Arabs, especially family members or members of their communities or villages, who had already settled in Detroit (Ameri and Lockwood 2001). The Arab community in the Detroit metropolitan area consists of many small communities that include Lebanese, Iraqis, Palestinians, and Egyptians, Muslims (Shi'a and Sunni), and Christians (Suleiman 1999).

The Chicago-land area also has a large number of Arab Americans. Arab immigration to Chicago started at the turn of the century when Syrian-Lebanese Christians began to arrive and work mostly as door-to-door peddlers. In the 1920s, immigrants from two cities in Palestine, a Muslim city and a Christian city, began to arrive. Later immigrants from Jordan followed. The Arab population in Chicago consists of many different nationalities, including Syrian-Lebanese (mostly Christians), Egyptians (Coptics and Muslims), Palestinians (Christians and Muslims), Jordanians (mostly Christians) and Iraqis (Hanania 2002).

One-on-one, face-to-face, 20-45 minute semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 immigrants who arrived in the U.S. at age 7 or older and have attended at least one year of high school in the U.S. Sixteen of the participants were from the Detroit metropolitan area; only one was from the Chicago-land area. The length of the interview allowed rapport to be built between the interviewer and interviewee and a good amount of information to be obtained from the student. This style made the participants comfortable enough to share their answers with the interviewer. The participants were recruited from institutions of higher education. Snowball sampling was used to recruit more participants for the study. More specifically, by collaborating with leaders of Arab and Muslim student organizations at colleges and universities, contact information for students that fit the criteria was obtained. Students who agreed to participate were then asked to identify other students who might be interested to take part in the study. The interviews were conducted only after a consent form was signed by the participant. Those who participated in the interview had to give consent to be audio-taped, and they received a \$10 gift card for participating. The participants were assured that all information shared would be confidential. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any point without any penalty or loss of privilege.

**Table 1. Description of Interview Participants**

<b>Number of Participants</b>	17
<b>Average Age (17-28)</b>	21.2
<b>Gender</b>	
Men	(29.4%) 5
Women	(70.6%) 12
<b>College Student</b>	(88.2%) 15
Yes	(11.8%) 2
No	
<b>Religion</b>	
Atheist	(5.9%) 1
Catholic	(17.5%) 3
Eastern Orthodox	(5.9%) 1
Muslim (Shi'a)	(29.4%) 5
Muslim (Sunni)	(41.2%) 7
<b>U.S. Born</b>	
Yes	(0%) 0
No	(100%) 17
<b>County of Birth</b>	
Iraq	(11.8%) 2
Jordan	(11.8%) 2
Lebanon	(35.3%) 6
Palestine	(5.9%) 1
Yemen	(29.4%) 5
Other	(5.9%) 1
<b>Immigrated With Parents</b>	
Yes	(94.1%) 16
No	(5.9%) 1
<b>Average age at arrival (7-17)</b>	12.4
<b>Father's highest level of education</b>	(35.3%) 6
Less than High School	(11.8%) 2
High School	(5.9%) 1
2-year college (Associate Degree)	(29.4%) 5
4-year college (Bachelor Degree)	(5.9%) 1

Master's Degree	(5.9%)	1
Unknown		
<b>Mother's highest level of education</b>		
Less than High School	(52.9%)	9
High School	(11.8%)	2
2-year college (Associate Degree)	(0%)	0
4-year college (Bachelor Degree)	(35.3%)	6
Master's Degree	(0%)	0
Unknown	(0%)	0

Table 1 provides a profile of interview participants. The average age of the 17 participants was 21.2 years. There were many more female participants (12; 70.6%) than male participants (5; 29.4%), and 15 (88.2%) of them were college students. The participants represented 5 different religions: one participant (5.9%) was an atheist, three (17.5%) were Catholic, one (5.9%) was Eastern Orthodox, five (29.4%) were Shi'a Muslim, and seven (41.2%) were Sunni Muslim. None of them were born in the U.S. A diverse national background was represented: two (11.8%) were from Iraq, another two (11.8%) were from Jordan, six (35.3%) from Lebanon, one (5.9%) from Palestine, one (5.9%) from Saudi Arabia, and five (29.4%) from Yemen. All but one, or 16 (94.1%) of the participants, immigrated to the U.S with their parents. Many of the fathers of the participants did not have high levels of education. Six (35.3%) had less than high school education, two (11.8%) had a high school education, one (5.9%) had a 2-year college degree, five (29.4%) had a 4-year college degree, and one (5.9%) had a master's degree. One participant's father was deceased and she didn't know his education level. Most of the mothers, (9; 52.9%) had less than high school education; very few (2; 11.8%) had high school education, and a larger proportion, (6; 35.3%), than those with a high school education have a 4-year college degree.

This research took place in the winter and spring of 2012. This was a qualitative study that included open-ended questions. Guiding questions were used to keep the discussion focused; however, the participants were encouraged to elaborate on subjects they wanted to discuss and stories they wanted to share. When a certain topic emerged, probes were used in order for the participant to elaborate further. Table 2 includes the guiding questions that were used for the interview. Table 3 illustrates the interview questions and how they relate to the corresponding variable.

**Table 2. Interview Questions**

- 
- Q. Let's start out by thinking back to life in (country of origin). What was it like? Why did your family immigrate to the United States?*
- Q. What do you like most about school here? What do you find most challenging, or wish you could change?*
- Q. What do you like most about your classes? What do you find most challenging about your classes?*
- Q. How do you do in your classes? Are you happy with your grades? Anything you wish you could do to improve?*
- Q. What kind of ways are your parents involved in your education?*
- Q. Let's talk about your social life at school. Do you think coming from (country of origin) affects who you are friends with? Have you ever been made fun of due to your ethnicity? Have you ever been made fun of due to your religion?*
- Q. Let's talk about the future. What do you plan to do after you graduate high school (or in the future)? What is the highest level of education you plan on completing?*

**Table 3. Variables and Relative Interview Questions**

<b>Academic Achievement</b>	<b>How do you do in your classes?</b>
	<b>Are you happy with your grades?</b>
	<b>Anything you wish you could improve?</b>
	<b>What is the highest level of education you plan on completing?</b>
<b>Parental Involvement</b>	<b>What kind of ways are your parents involved in your education?</b>
<b>Discrimination</b>	<b>Do you think coming from (country of origin) affects who you are friends with?</b>
	<b>Have you ever been made fun of due to your ethnicity?</b>
	<b>Have you ever been made fun of due to your religion?</b>
<b>Experience in Country of Origin</b>	<b>Thinking about your life in (country of origin). What was it like?</b>
	<b>Why did your family immigrate to the U.S.?</b>

*Measures*

Discrimination is defined as unfair or poor treatment of individuals due to ethnicity and/or religion; marginalization is defined as being kept outside of mainstream society due to ethnicity and/or religion. Parental involvement is defined as the extent to which parents help their children with academic work; ask and follow up with questions regarding homework assignments, projects, and exams; attend parent-teacher

conferences; provide encouragement and emotional support; and set clear expectations. Academic achievement is defined by how the students performed academically, measured by self-reported rating of their satisfaction with the grades that they received, their level of education, and their educational goals or level of education they wish to complete. Educational experiences are measured by their perception of the difficulty of the curriculum in their country of origin compared to the U.S. and the extent to which they were pleased or displeased with their schools, teachers, or the curriculum taught in their country of origin.

### *Participant Recruitment*

The recruiting process for this research was very challenging. Getting in contact with leaders of organizations proved to be difficult from the starting point; however, the more challenging part was convincing them to take the time to refer me to students who fit the criteria to participate in the interview and would be interested in doing so, as many times the leaders themselves were not eligible to participate because they were U.S. born.

Trying to get initial participants posed the biggest challenge. Spreading the word about the research through individuals or organizations that have an existing relationship with potential participants can speed up the process and make it more convenient (Temple and Brown 2011). Therefore, several faculty members, leaders of organizations, and acquaintances were contacted to assist with the recruiting process. Once the first participants were recruited, references were obtained, which created a snowball effect. However, since the initial participants, or gatekeepers, were from Dearborn, Michigan, they referred me to others in the same area. Although there is a big Arab population in other areas surrounding Detroit, recruiting participants from outside of Dearborn proved

to be more difficult; only 5 out of the 17 participants recruited for the interviews were outside Dearborn. Interviews took place either at the college or university's library or cafeteria, at someone's home, and or at a café. The interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed in order to analyze the discourse and identify recurring themes.

## Chapter 4: Analysis and Results

Transcriptions were analyzed using grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Corbin & Strauss 2008). The text was read, reread, and coded. Phrases, ideas, similarities, and differences were established in order to discover themes that emerged from the interviews conducted. Once the themes from each interview were developed, themes from all 17 interviews were compared until salient themes and sub-themes were established. Both inductive and deductive coding took place. For example, there were questions regarding parental involvement, discrimination, and education in their country of origin. However, certain themes emerged during the interviews that were not asked about.

Although previous literature on immigrant students and academic achievement was used to guide the design of the research questions (Fuligni 1997; Wright 2010; Garrett and Holcomb 2005; Jamal and Naber 2008), probing questions were used to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses (e.g. you talked about \_\_\_\_\_, can you tell me more about that? How did that make you feel?) (Bates et al. 2008). Using guiding questions ensures that the same areas or topics are discussed in all of the interviews, but allowing the participants a degree of freedom to elaborate on responses, and asking subsequent questions based on those responses, will encourage them to share more information that they find to be relevant or important to them. This can help shed more light on their situations (Babbie 1999). Nonetheless, all of the guiding questions were asked during the interview, even if the discussion shifted at certain points.

In addition, topics brought up by the participants in the first few interviews assisted in the formation of additional questions regarding that topic. More specifically,

the first interviewee talked about divisions that exist between U.S.-born Arabs and immigrant Arabs. This was not something that was anticipated, nor was it a phenomenon that was found in the literature reviewed before the interviews took place. The participant discussed this topic at length and expressed the prevalence of it and the impact that it has on the students. When conducting the following couple of interviews, participants also brought up this issue, which led to the formation of a question on this topic on each of the following interviews. Allowing the participant to elaborate and take the discussion in a different direction allows for inductive results to emerge and for the researcher to gain a more in-depth understanding of the issue at hand.

### *Themes*

During the analysis, four major themes emerged from the interviews; the first theme is “us vs. them.” This refers to the Arab students feeling that they are being categorized as the “other” and feeling marginalized at school by students. This issue came up at the first interview and consistently at every other interview. Within this theme, three sub-themes emerged; the first is “us vs. them: until we become them,” and this refers to divisions between U.S.-born Arab students and immigrant Arabs wherein immigrant Arabs are accepted only after they have adopted a more American way of life. The second sub-theme is “us vs. them: will we ever become them?” This refers to the skepticism that Arab immigrant students have with regard to becoming part of the mainstream. Finally, the third is “us vs. them: we don’t want to be us.” This theme refers to students denying their ethnic background in order to not face discrimination from other students.

The second theme found is titled “a struggle for all,” which refers to the struggle that both parents and children face upon migration and its effects on parental involvement. It includes language barriers, financial strain, and lack of knowledge and experience in the new land. Within this theme two additional subthemes emerged. The first is “I need translation. ‘Yeah, and so do I,’” which refers to the fact that both the children and the parents struggle with acquiring the language, thus, children are not able to receive help from their parents with school work. The second subtheme is “Need money, now!” which refers to the students who must work to help their families financially.

The third theme is “we will have it no other way,” and this refers to the expectations that parents have for their children to go to college. The fourth theme is titled “rigorous academics,” which sheds light on different levels of academic difficulty that exist in the U.S. compared to their home countries. Two subthemes were also identified; the first one is “this is a piece of cake” and refers to the difficulty of the curriculum in their home countries compared to the U.S.; the second is “wait, you mean I can look you in the eye?” and refers to the differences that exist between student-teacher relations in the U.S. vs. in their home countries.

### *Results*

#### **“Us vs. Them”**

*“Us vs. them: until we become them.”*

The first subtheme identified brought to the surface issues of divisions between U.S.-born Arabs and immigrant Arabs. Students reported getting rejected, picked on, laughed at, and called names by U.S.-born Arabs. Hamzah, who comes from Yemen,

reported this issue, in addition to the lack of English language proficiency, as the biggest challenge he faced when he arrived in the U.S.

**Hamzah:** The people that come from overseas they're usually called "boaters" by the ones that were born here; that damages their name so they don't like the ones that come from overseas. But it's very hard for people that do come from overseas to get along with them. People my age, they don't accept the newcomers.

Rula is a student who arrived at the age of 17 from Lebanon, and she elaborates further on this issue. Rula spoke English very well and thus was placed in mainstream classes, which are classes for students who speak English fluently, rather than bilingual classes, which provide extra support for newcomers who are still learning the English language. Being in mainstream classes, Rula was mostly in contact with the U.S.-born Arabs, but like Hamzah, she became aware of the negative perception that U.S.-born Arabs had of the immigrant Arab students and their desire to disassociate themselves from them.

**Rula:** The second thing like they tell you that we don't speak Arabic. And like at the parent conference I see them speaking Arabic with their parents, like why do you? Like why are you ashamed?

The U.S.-born Arab students used to the word "boater" as a way to differentiate themselves from the immigrants. Since they all share the same ethnic background, they needed to differentiate themselves somehow from what they perceive to be non-American individuals. Students are identified as "boaters" in the Dearborn community if they are more recent immigrants, speak no English, speak Arabic more than English, or

speaking English with an accent (Ajrouch 2004). Rula discusses the word “boater” being used by the American-born Arabs.

**Rula:** I saw a lot of people like the “boater” word, like a section in the school that’s all bilingual classes, and our section is all mainstream so it’s like all the Arab people they gather over there so the American-born, they used to comment...

**Interviewer:** The American-born Arabs or just the Americans?

**Rula:** No, the American born Arabs; the Americans were nicer than the American-born Arabs. So they used to walk in the hallways and say “boater” or making fun of them, like “Look how she’s dressed.”

Way of dress was another thing that the U.S.-born Arabs used to make fun of the newcomers, for some may wear the traditional Islamic clothing or clothing that’s different from what the U.S.-born Arabs wear. Another student expressed her confusion as to why the U.S.-born Arabs would make fun of the way she’s dressed.

**Ahlam:** Even the mainstreams, even if they’re Yemeni or Arabs they tell us, it’s not only the Americans, it’s like all of them. It’s like they’re Yemenis and they know why we wear this and they call us that (Ninjas). I was thinking like, they’re Yemenis and we’re Yemenis, why they thinking we’re ninjas over here? We’re different. They think they’re more open, more open-minded.

One of the male participants also stated that bullying by native-born Arabs was also a major issue that immigrant students had to deal with. Hamzah spoke about how he had to find appropriate strategies to make the bullying stop.

**Hamzah:** Bullying is one of the biggest things, they would bully you if you show them that you're afraid. They just keep doing it, but if you show them a different face and kinda stop them, they would wanna know you more and they would be your friends, it's a different mentality but it's still going on in the community.

While a study presented by the American Sociological Association found that students who are bullied suffer academically (ASA 2011), many of the participants reported that they wanted to work harder and learn the language quickly in order for them to lose the "boater" status. For example, one participant stated that the treatment that she got from the students when she first arrived in the U.S. was "terrible." Being made fun of due to her lack of English language gave her motivation to work harder to learn the language.

**Suhair:** Terrible, like they was laughing, they say words, they make fun of you if you say something wrong and then if you go to the board they all laugh at you because of your language.

When asked how it made her feel, the participant stated:

**Suhair:** I ignore it, and I try to study more so I can learn the language more.

Other students also expressed their desire to not be categorized as the "other." They wanted to integrate better in school and in their new society and realized that the only way was for them to work hard to learn the language. They perceived language to be one of the things that differentiated them and thus this was a major motivation for them to work harder.

Students from outside of Dearborn also talked about the same experiences with wanting to learn the language in order to make friends and integrate better in their new society. However, they didn't experience the bilingual program that exists in Dearborn.

The schools that they attended didn't have a large Arab population. Thus their experiences were different. Since the Arab population was small, they sought out other Arabs because they couldn't speak the language well enough to befriend non-Arab speakers.

**Geries:** The English language was too hard for us, to speak with people and to understand.

**Interviewer:** So how did you start making friends?

**Geries:** I started finding people that speak my language.

Since their number was small, the Arabs didn't seem to have divisions; rather they befriended one another, regardless of whether they were newcomers or U.S.-born. However, Geries reported being targeted along with other immigrant students from different ethnic backgrounds. The following illustrates the type of problems Geries faced, especially since he immigrated shortly after 9/11.

**Geries:** They will make fun of everybody, but the main thing they made fun of Arabs. Because of all the problems we have right now (post-9/11). And all these problems they started when I came (2002).

Geries attended two different high schools. He reported that the first high school didn't have many ethnic minorities, and he didn't experience any problems in that high school. However, the second high school had many ethnic minorities, and he reported that there were many ethnic divisions there. Individuals would affiliate only with their own ethnic group, and conflicts may arise between the different ethnic groups.

*“Us vs. them: will we ever become them?”*

Being separated from the mainstream students also gave the students in Dearborn, Michigan, a unique experience. The bilingual classes were started in Dearborn due to the large number of immigrant students. Ninety percent of the students in Dearborn are from Arabic-speaking countries. New students entering the Dearborn system are asked two questions: whether English was the first language they learned, and what language is spoken in their homes. If the answer to either one of those question is a language other than English, they are assessed in order to be properly placed in either mainstream or bilingual classes. The students’ parents are then sent a letter in English and in their native language to inform them where their child will be placed (Von Frank 2008). The Dearborn system is succeeding relative to other districts in the country with high immigrant population. Immigrants are acquiring English and achieving academic proficiency approximately 60% faster than immigrants in other districts (Von Frank 2008). Yet the participants interviewed reported feeling marginalized by being placed in bilingual classes. They reported feeling handicapped and being viewed as inferior by mainstream students. Also, being placed with all bilingual students kept them segregated from the American-born students.

**Ali:** And when I go to middle school, because I just came from another country they put me in English, ESL, they call them ESL classes, and they were more like they were kinda special Ed. And it’s kinda, it was offensive to me in a lot of ways. Because I literally knew grammar and English better than most mainstream kids.

Ali continues to elaborate on how it made him feel to be placed in ESL or bilingual classes.

**Ali:** They called them the mainstream, which was psychologically scarring for someone like me. Because you come from, we really studied hard in Lebanon, I was the best in my school. I didn't have the best grades, I was let's say popular if you want to call it. Because my older brothers went to the same school, so it kind of helped me.

**Interviewer:** Paved the way for you, right?

**Ali:** Yeah.

When asked if he ever made it into mainstream Ali said:

**Ali:** No. I never, I never actually made it into mainstream.

Feeling marginalized or being categorized as the "other" can have a negative impact on the students' attitudes (Portes 1999). One of the participants stated that after 9/11 he stopped trying at school. Although he couldn't elaborate on why exactly, he did state that he began to feel very different than the others. He was getting his news from different media sources than the other students; thus he started to view issues from different perspectives. Initially, his hope was to make it into the U.S. military, but after 9/11 he felt that he wasn't sure if that dream was a realistic one.

**Ali:** Initially I worked really hard because I knew that to make it to military academies like U.S. Air Force Academy West Point you have to have the grades.

*"Us vs. them: we don't want to be us."*

The third subtheme that emerged was regarding students who migrated at an earlier age. They reported wishing they had been born in the U.S., because they didn't

want an immigrant status. That is a good illustration of the negative feelings that stem from being labeled as the “other.” One of the participants outside the Dearborn area experienced negative encounters with another student who called her names like “terrorist.” Although she came to the U.S. from Ramallah, Palestine, at the age of 7 and spoke English with no accent at the time of the incident, she was still targeted due to her ethnic background. When asked if most of her friends were Arab, she stated:

**Eleena:** No, not at all. As I grew older, after 9/11, I actually got called a terrorist by a student and he didn’t get in trouble at all, no punishment at all. So, if anything I wanted to get away from that, I wanted to get away from being Arabic. I wouldn’t say I was Arabic, I would say that I was Greek to everybody.

Eleena also reported that other native-born Arabs at her school didn’t reveal their ethnic background in order to fit in better. Eleena wasn’t even sure how many Arabs actually attended her high school. She states that she knew some were indeed Arab, but many kept quiet about it.

### **“A Struggle for All”**

*“I need translation”; “yeah, so do I.”*

When asked about how involved their parents were, many of the participants reported that the lack of knowledge and language skills made it difficult for parents to become involved. They lacked knowledge of the system, and many didn’t speak the language, thus making it a challenge to get involved in the school. Many of the parents could not help their children with their academics if they needed it. Hamzah expressed his regret about not putting forth his best effort academically during high school. When asked why, he immediately raised the issue of parental involvement.

**Hamzah:** It goes back to the parents at home, they don't really know the system in school so I would kind of go around them, since no one knows how it goes and I know how it goes, I'll deal with it myself. I wasn't pushing myself too hard because I was missing support.

Twelve out of the seventeen participants reported regretting not receiving better grades. Their education was left up to them, and as adolescents they sometimes made bad choices when it came to academics. They also shared that if support had been provided by their parents, or if they pushed them harder, they would have done better because they had the potential but may not have had the amount of self-discipline needed to fulfill certain school tasks.

**Hamzah:** If I tell them yes I have homework, they would tell me to do it. If I tell them no they would believe; they wouldn't try to make sure, or even if they try to make sure they don't know how to make sure if I have homework.

All but one of the respondents reported their parents having lack of awareness when it comes to the educational system in the U.S. Lack of supervision and instrumental and informational support made the students' experiences challenging. Some of the participants reported receiving emotional support from their parents. Nawal, a 20-year-old engineering student from Lebanon who migrated to the U.S. at the age of 10, shared that although her parents were not able to provide assistance with academics due to their lack of English language skills and education, her mother would stay up late at night with her to make her snacks while she studied. However, she still felt that she was at a disadvantage because if she had difficulty with any subject, she struggled with it and got through it on her own. They not only had to obtain certain information on their own and

figure out what information they needed, but they also had to depend on themselves to make decisions about their education. Ali shared that his plan in high school was to join the military; he looks back and describes himself in high school as:

**Ali:** Again just a teenager handling his business, my parents didn't have any input they don't know about this stuff. Nobody knows.

So as the child struggles to make certain decisions, they may feel increased pressure since they're not obtaining advice from parents. Parents may be unable to provide the child advice if their knowledge and experience of the culture and the system is limited. Also, participants reported that their parents were busy working and trying to acquire money in order to gain financial security and improve their status and thus don't have the time to be as involved in their children's education. Ali talks about his parents' perspective on work and money.

**Ali:** Yes. They thought, their mindset, was we need to make a lot of money. Not because they were greedy but they felt insecure, they felt insecure about their situation.

*"Need money. Now!"*

Financial instability and needing to work many hours affects not only parental involvement but also the students directly. I would like to note that this topic emerged only during conversations with male participants. All of the male participants reported having to work during high school to help the family with finances. They felt pressured to work long hours in order to provide financial assistance to their parents. This held them back in many ways. The participants reported not having enough time to study and feeling tired at school. One of the participants started a business with his brother during

high school and reported that because he was making a lot of money, he didn't want to invest the time and go to college, although he had a great desire to. Being accustomed to a certain income made it too difficult for him to leave his business in order to go to school. He reported basing his decision on the income that he currently made vs. his potential income with a business degree.

**Firas:** Well I registered three times in a college, (but) I didn't go yet. Always I was busy at work. I wanna go into business, so what's the business (degree) gonna offer me? \$35,000 a year \$40,000 a year? It's not enough.

Another participant mentioned feeling underprivileged as all the other students would get together and play sports and he couldn't join them because he had to go to work. These students knew how important it was for them to work and provide some financial assistance to their families. With that, they also wanted to receive a good education. Working long hours during the school year makes it very challenging for the student to focus on school. Juggling a job, trying to get adapted in a new country, learn the language and the culture, and make friends can be overwhelming for anyone, but it can be especially challenging for an adolescent.

It becomes even more overwhelming when parents pressure the child to work more hours because they need the extra income. Needing the child to work, the parents may not expect the child to pursue higher education. Hamzah reports that his parents don't understand that he needs time to study, and they put pressure on him to work longer hours. Hamzah explains that other members of his family have encouraged him to go to college and get an education and have worked as mediators between him and parent(s),

where they helped the parents understand the value of his education and why they must be more understanding about time spent studying.

**Hamzah:** They know how my parents deal with college students. My relatives are saying sometimes parents need you to help them with finances, so they encouraged me to go around (my) parents, don't skip school, continue school no matter what.

Again, only the males brought up this issue. This may suggest that the families put pressure on the sons to take on some financial responsibility, but not on the daughters.

### **“We will have it no other way”**

While some parents may need their children, mainly sons, to help them financially and thus don't expect them to go to college, other parents make it clear to their children at a young age that obtaining higher education is not an option, but a must. Most kids do have a desire to please their parents (Pickhardt 2009), so parents' strong expectation for their children to attend college may indeed be a big motivating factor for the children. When the participants were asked why they decided to go on to higher education, four of them stated that they didn't have a choice. One of the participants, Zahida, is a South Asian who migrated from Saudi Arabia. Zahida was included in the study because coming from an Arab country and being Muslim, she had very similar experiences to Arab participants. Zahida elaborated further on “having no choice.” Although she wanted to take some time off after high school, she didn't, and she decided to start attending college immediately. Pleasing her parents was important to her, but she also reported that since her parents were supporting her financially she had no other choice but to attend

college immediately after graduation. Another participant, an 18-year-old female from Jordan who immigrated at the age of 16, shared the following:

**Nadine:** Not going to college is not a choice in this house. I had to, I had to go to college.

Most of the participants were college or university students; only two were not. One of the two participants who wasn't a college student reported that his parents left the choice for him to make.

**Firas:** When I finished high school my dad talked to me and my mom, they say "Hey it's your choice, if you think you're gonna go to college it's better to finish just like your brother and your sister, if you don't, you have to know what you're doing. Because college here is not like back home, back home you study college you not payin' nothin', here you waste your time, and time is money and you're wasting your money paying for college."

This narrative suggests that they're leaving the choice up to him. However, they may have discouraged him by assuming that he has a high chance of failure and implying he may discontinue his education after spending his time and money.

### **"Rigorous Academics"**

This was the fourth theme that emerged during the interviews. All but one of the participants reported that academics in their home countries were more difficult than they were here. They reported having more advanced math courses than in the U.S. They also reported having to memorize material. Many of the respondents stated that school was more serious than it was in the U.S. and that they would have to suffer punishment from teachers if homework or schoolwork was not completed. Two of the respondents reported

that in their home countries, teachers did not pay attention to them and/or treated them harshly.

**Geries:** All the teachers (back home) they don't care about nobody, nobody care, it's just school okay, if you're smart okay everybody cares, if you're not they're gonna stay in the back seat. It's all government school they don't care. Here they pay attention to everybody.

Another participant adds:

**Firas:** They used to give you homework and a lot of homework and they don't help you, and if you come back and you don't do your homework, they used to hit you.

They found that the academics here were much easier and presented in a different manner. All but one of the participants stated that they liked the fact that school in the U.S. presented much more variety (i.e. switching classrooms for each subject, labs for science classes, and technology in the classroom) than schools in their home country. Since math courses were more advanced in their countries of origin, when they came here math was very easy to them, since they had taken the same math curriculum years prior.

**Ahlam:** What we take in high school (here), like in 6<sup>th</sup> grade we took it so it's so easy.

Geries similarly reports that math classes in Jordan were much harder than in the U.S.

**Geries:** The math back home it was hard for us but when we came here it was easy. Back home they were giving us everything when we were young.

Finding the curriculum easy is a factor that pushed many of the students to continue on to higher education. Although Hamzah's parents did not understand the time obligations

that he had to his schoolwork and he would often feel pressured to put in more hours at work, finding the schoolwork relatively simple gave him the desire to continue.

**Hamzah:** The thing that made me decide, make my decision and still pushes me is the fact that I see how easy school is, it's not very difficult.

Math classes were easy for them, which gave them a boost of confidence. Most of the respondents proudly reported that they took advanced math courses or that other students would often comment about their strength in math. One of the students said that she liked math classes because it was so easy for her. Furthermore, most of the students who reported liking math ended up majoring in a math-related field of study such as engineering or computer science.

All of the participants reported the difference between teachers in the U.S. and teachers in their home countries. They found that the teachers in the United States were more friendly, helpful, and easy to approach, while in their home country the teacher was an authoritarian figure who required high levels of respect. The teachers in their home countries would perform their job but not give the students any type of support or encouragement. Respect for elders is a very important value for Arabs (Zogby 2002); thus the teachers try to maintain that level of respect by not becoming too friendly with the students.

The attitudes of the teachers in the U.S. made the newcomers more comfortable at a time when they viewed their lives to be a struggle. Many of the respondents spoke of how teachers would often encourage them and give them advice about life outside of school. None of the respondents reported feeling any discrimination or receiving poor services at school. Instead most of the respondents' experiences were positive ones. One

student, however, did report hating high school because the teachers didn't have any authority which made the school, in her view, chaotic. Rana, who arrived in the U.S. at 17 from Lebanon, shares her experience.

**Rana:** The way they talk to instructors.

**Interviewer:** It wasn't something you were used to?

**Rana:** No, in Lebanon we would respect our instructors; here they would just call them by their names or a swear word. (chuckle)

Rana continued to talk about how the disrespect that went on in high school made her very eager to leave. She took advanced placement classes at a nearby university during high school in order to spend as little time at her high school as possible.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Limitations, and Recommendations for Future Research and Action and Conclusion**

The interviews shed light on the experiences of Arab-American immigrants and their academic achievement. Overall, the participants reported feeling marginalized and discriminated against at school. Students who graduated from Dearborn Public Schools do indeed have a unique situation since the vast majority of students in the district are of Arab ancestry. Thus, they reported feeling discriminated against by the U.S.-born Arabs. Although discrimination from one racial or ethnic group against another was anticipated, discrimination against individuals of one's same ethnic and/or religious background was not. All but two of the participants outside of the Dearborn Public School District reported feeling discriminated against due to their ethnicity and/or religion. Many students reflected on 9/11 and shared some of their experiences. One of the participants who arrived in the U.S. at the age of 7 elaborately conveyed how she dealt with the problem, both externally and internally. After the attacks of 9/11, she felt that her national and/or ethnic identity needed to be hidden from other students because she had already faced harassment from one student and didn't want to deal with further issues. Coming from a school with a small Arab population, she witnessed other U.S.-born Arab students hiding their ethnic background. Shalabi (2001) found that students who were classified high on the Arab Culture Inventory Scale, which is a scale that measures the level of interest in maintaining Arab culture and heritage, performed significantly better on reading, mathematics, and language IOWA tests than those who did not. Negative stereotyping, misinformation about culture and history, and discrimination can have a significant impact on the behavior and achievement of members of an ethnic minority

(Shalabi 2001; Al-Khatib 1999). Previous research studies on children from other minority ethnic groups have found that these negative images cause them to have negative feelings toward their own ethnic group (Aboud and Skerry 1984; Corenblum and Annis 1987; Weiland and Coughlin 1979; Al-Khatib 1999). This can have negative effects on the student's self-concept and self-esteem (Al-Khatib 1999). Feeling a sense of embarrassment or shame towards their culture and heritage, they may start denying it or even rebelling against it (Shalabi 2001). However, identifying with the ideal image around them is impossible, which can lead to feelings of emptiness and isolation (Shalabi 2001). Therefore, when Arab students do not feel comfortable with disclosing their ethnic background and constantly have to hide their culture and heritage, this could cause problematic outcomes to their self-concept and academic achievement.

In general, however, the findings from this study suggest that students' academics did not seem to suffer due to the discrimination that they faced. The students from Dearborn Public Schools especially felt that some of the discrimination they faced stemmed from their lack of English language skills, and thus it made them want to work harder to learn the language and be able to integrate better in the schools. However, one participant started to feel discouraged academically after 9/11. He had worked hard in order to achieve his goal to join the U.S. Air Force, but after 9/11 he didn't know whether or not he would fit in.

Immigrant students in the Dearborn Public School system faced discrimination mostly from native-born Arab students. The earlier discussion regarding feeling shame and embarrassment toward one's culture and heritage may clarify why this phenomenon is occurring. Being proud of one's culture and heritage is not only the foundation for a

stable identity and self-esteem (Al-Khatab 1999), which has a relationship with high academic achievement, but also children who respect their own culture and heritage also respect the culture of other people (Al-Khatab 1999). The U.S.-born Arab students have a great desire to be part of mainstream culture. One could hypothesize that these students might have received negative messages or images that devalued their ethnic group, and thus they feel that their culture is inferior to that of the U.S. The U.S.-born Arabs differentiate themselves from the immigrant Arabs in order to establish their connection to American culture (Ajrouch 2004).

Over 30 years of research has shown that parents' contributions to their child's education are crucial to a child's success in school (Golan & Peterson 2002; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Foreign-born parents, however, have to face many obstacles when it comes to getting involved in their children's education. Lack of language skills, resources, cultural differences that could lead to miscommunication, unfamiliarity with the U.S. school system, and feeling intimidated due to their lack of knowledge (Golan & Peterson 2002) are some barriers that they might face. The findings from this study coincided with the literature on immigrant parents and parental involvement (Ramirez 2003; Turney and Kao 2009; Varela 2008). The study revealed that foreign-born parents face many challenges that prevent them from becoming more involved in the education of their children.

In addition, parental involvement and parental influences were major factors that played a role in the academic achievement of immigrant students. Many of the students reported feeling regret that they did not perform as well as they could have because they

did not have proper supervision. Parents often would rely on their children to inform them about their academics. They handed over the responsibility of their children's academics completely to the child since they lack the language skills and knowledge to become more involved themselves and are therefore unable to provide their children with advice.

Nonetheless, most of the participants reported having relatively good GPAs and most were pursuing higher education, although many of the parents did not have the knowledge and/or resources to help their children academically; it was found that their emotional support and expectations are very influential components when it comes to children pursuing higher education.

Helping parents become more involved may prove to be beneficial for their children and their education. Depending on the types of barriers that exist regarding parental involvement, schools may be able to provide language services for the parents in order to increase their involvement in their children's education (Golan and Petersen 2002). Ensuring that parents have some translation and interpretation services for important documents and parent-teacher meetings may increase parental involvement for these groups. Sending parents documents that include more information on how to become involved can also be very helpful. Since they are in a new country and they're dealing with a different system, they may not know what to ask about or check for when it comes to their child's education. Providing them with this information in their own language, and providing teachers with training to make them aware of Arab culture, could increase the likelihood that they become more involved.

Another issue that could stand in the way of parental involvement is the fact that parents themselves have to deal with significant struggles when they immigrate. They often have to work long hours and deal with the struggles of everyday life in a country much different from their own. Different language, different culture, and a different system that they don't know how to navigate can prove to be very challenging. Therefore, they're not able to provide their children with the advice or supervision that they need during their adolescent years.

Their financial struggles may also put a lot of pressure on males to help their parents financially. Male participants reported having to work during high school to help support the family financially. The males felt a lot of pressure to work many hours and help the family, although they knew they were not able to perform as well academically if they did so. One of the participants who worked during high school reported that he didn't have enough time to study and improve his reading and writing skills, which has really stood in his way of pursuing a higher education. He also added that although his parents wanted him to obtain a college education, they were well aware of all the barriers he was facing. Their struggles upon arrival were hard and real; thus their son's education could not be their top priority.

In a meta-analysis of 25 studies on parental involvement and academic achievement, it was revealed that parental expectation for their children and their education achievement has the strongest relationship to high academic achievement (Fan and Chen 2001). The data from this study support these findings. The participants reported feeling that parental expectations needed to be met. Parental expectations seemed to be embedded in them, where they didn't even have to give much thought or

consideration to having to reach that expectation. For example, when certain participants were asked why they pursued higher education, they responded that it wasn't a choice for them. When the expectation is realistic and established, and the significance of it is made clear, it becomes entrenched in the student.

Parental expectation has been found to have a stronger relationship with academic achievement when parents have higher socioeconomic status than when parents have lower socioeconomic status (Balboni and Pedrabissi 1998). Parents of low socioeconomic status may have an expectation but can't provide the means for the child to achieve that expectation. In other words, parents may have a great desire for their children to obtain a college degree, but when circumstances are such that they are not able to provide opportunity that would allow those expectations to become reality, they won't hold on to the expectation. More specifically, parents with more resources are able to have the expectation of their children obtaining a college education, while parents with little resources may know the importance of higher education and may have a great desire for their children to obtain a college education, yet they are not able to expect it because their need for financial assistance is immediate and severe.

Given that parents of the immigrant students may not be able to provide all the support that their child may need academically, it becomes vital that the teachers and the school administration provide extra assistance to the students. While many of the participants reported receiving some advice and information from teachers and counselors regarding higher education, many reported that they did not receive the information needed and had to rely on friends or relatives. It is crucial for teachers and administration to provide the students with motivation and information regarding higher

education. The information should not be provided merely for students who show interest but for all students.

Most of the participants from this study reported that they did receive some support from teachers and school administrators. The friendly student-teacher relationships in the U.S. were preferred over the formal student-teacher relationships that exist in their countries of origin. The friendliness of the teachers, the motivation they offered, and concern that they showed gave the students the feeling that the teacher had a strong desire to help them feel comfortable to express any difficulties they were facing. The students were pleasantly surprised to find that less formal relationships existed between students and teachers in the U.S. than the more relationships that they knew in their homeland, where they were not comfortable enough to discuss with a teacher any problems they may be facing, especially outside of class.

Most of the participants were enrolled in an institution of higher education, despite low parental involvement and high reported levels of discrimination. One of the findings may shed light on how these students managed to achieve enrollment in higher education. Bandura (1993) argues that perception of one's abilities influences academic achievement (Al-Khatab 1999). The participants reported that the difficulty of the curriculum in their home country, especially in mathematics, made mathematics classes for them in the United States very simple. The students reported feeling confident about their abilities in math classes and enjoying the attention they received from other students due to their advanced knowledge. Having that knowledge in the class might have increased the students' self-efficacy and given them the perception that they are capable, which has been linked to academic achievement (Al-Khatab 1999). This suggests that

experiences, especially educational experiences in their home country, can indeed affect their educational experience in the host country.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research and Action**

Ideally this study should be conducted in a high school setting to give access to students who are currently in the midst of high school and all its experiences. It would provide easier access to a larger number of student participants. In addition, obtaining academic records and standardized test scores for each of the participants would provide a more objective picture on the student's academic achievement. In this study, students merely provided their own perspective on their performance and academic achievement in school. Although some students voluntarily shared their GPAs in high school, not all students shared that information. In addition, the reported GPAs may not be accurate since they have to recall that information from years previous.

Going into the schools to conduct interviews and observing interactions in and outside of classes would also provide some insight on the students' experiences at school. Interviewing the parents will also shed light on the experiences of the parents and how it affects their children's experiences. Understanding firsthand the barriers that the parents face may provide a clearer picture of their situation. This could help schools take steps toward integrating immigrant parents into the schools in order to give them an opportunity to be more involved in their child's education.

The participants in the study had already graduated from high school and thus had to reflect on their high school years in order to share their experiences. Having to share the experiences through reflection may not give an accurate representation of what their experiences were at the time. Looking back from a different lens, they may evaluate

experiences differently and not recollect the exact feelings or experiences that they had. This should be a consideration for future research.

Two participants in this study were from Iraq and fled after the war. Although the war affected their lives greatly and they experienced some hardships due to it, they had not experienced any trauma due to injury to themselves or close family members. Their family's financial situation allowed them to escape shortly after the war started. Thus it is really vital to examine the experiences of immigrant students who have experienced injuries to themselves or others around them and loss of parent(s) or sibling(s).

Another limitation is that the participants were mostly college students; therefore, this study does not examine the experiences of those who either dropped out of high school or did not pursue higher education. More interviews with those students would allow researchers to compare the experiences of those who did pursue higher education with those who did not. That information would provide more insight into the reasons why some students succeed and some do not when it comes to academic achievement and obtaining a higher degree.

Finally, the findings from this study, especially the findings with respect to divisions between U.S.-born Arabs and immigrant Arabs and the bilingual education program in Dearborn, Michigan, are not likely to apply to a national sample of Arab immigrants. The Dearborn public school system is unique because of its Arab population. Since 12 out of the 17 participants were from Dearborn public schools, most of the findings from this study are relevant to their experiences.

## **Conclusion**

There are many factors that must be considered when evaluating immigrants and their experiences in the host country. From dynamics of ethnic relations in their country of origin to historical periods in which immigrants arrive and context of interaction in homeland and host country, many aspects play a role in the experience of immigrants. Upon arrival to America, Arabs secured their status within the dominant race in order to obtain citizenship; however, this did not prove to be a deterrent against discrimination and ethnic bias. The second wave of Arab immigrants, arriving after the Second World War, consisted of mostly highly educated individuals who identified with being “white.” After the 1967 Arab/Israeli war, the support of Israel by the United States as well as negative media portrayals of Arabs made Arab Americans realize the bias that existed against Arabs and Arab Americans, and thus they became more politically active and began to view themselves as Arab Americans rather than identify with their national background (Aswad 1996; McCarus 1994). More recent Arab immigrants, those who came after 1990, are less likely than the earlier group to identify with being “white” and more likely to feel discrimination and bias. The 9/11 attacks increased the likelihood that Arab Americans identify with the “other” (Jamal & Naber 2008). However, bias and negative portrayal are not the only obstacles that Arab immigrants face. Assimilating to mainstream culture always poses challenges. Which aspects of one’s culture should be maintained and which ones should be altered to better fit the new society are dilemmas that Arab immigrants, as well as other recent immigrants, are facing today. These problems impact adults and children alike. Immigrant children have to deal with many

issues upon arrival, from learning the language to acquiring a new identity. These children must receive the appropriate attention in order to succeed in their new country.

Their experiences at schools and their academic achievements play a vital role in their long-term academic success. There is a need for research studies on Arab immigrant students in order to better understand their situations, dilemmas, and ways in helping them succeed. Understanding how recent events have impacted this group is essential. From conflicts and economic deprivation in their homeland to being labeled as the “other” in their new country, children are faced with many stresses that can cause emotional disturbances and thus influence their academic achievements. By examining how these issues affect them, areas may be identified to provide proper services for these children so they may move on with their lives in a positive way and reach their full potential.

Previous studies on Arab-American immigrant students have examined Arab-American adolescents and identity, issues of identity vis-à-vis academic achievement, and the cultural factors that may play a role in the parental involvement of Arab immigrant parents (Ajrouch 2004; Moosa, Karabenick & Adams 2001; Shalabi 2001). This study examined the general experience of Arab immigrant students considering the increased negative visibility of Arabs (Suleiman 1996), particularly post-9/11 (Jamal and Naber 2008), and the influx of immigration from countries experiencing war and conflict. Some of the findings from this study (i.e. parental involvement and expectation) were similar to other studies conducted on immigrants and academic achievement; however, this study revealed new knowledge of Arab immigrant students. First, it found the divisions that could exist between new Arab arrivals and U.S.-born Arabs in Dearborn,

Michigan, and how these divisions affect the new Arab arrivals. In addition, this study revealed that many Arab students post-9/11 are often too afraid or embarrassed to disclose their ethnicity to their peers at school. Experiencing the backlash that stems from the logic of collective responsibility (Howell & Shryock 2003), students might feel a necessity to hide their ethnic background in order to not be categorized as the “other.”

In addition, this study brought to the surface the additional challenges that immigrant males may face when it comes the expectation for them to help contribute financially to the family. Not enough time to concentrate on schoolwork may affect their academic achievement. Falling behind on schoolwork and not being able to perform due to their lack of time can directly affect their self-esteem in school and make them feel intimidated by school work and believe that school is “not for them.” This may decrease their chances of obtaining higher education.

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## Participant Consent Form

The purpose of this study is to understand students' experiences and how they affect the students' attitudes toward school and their academic achievement. You are being asked to participate in an interview that will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will consist of open-ended questions that will stir discussion about your academic and social experiences in high school as well as your achievement and future ambitions in education. These interviews will be audio-taped in order to help document the discussion. Participation in this interview is completely voluntary; you may skip questions you don't feel comfortable answering or stop the interview at any time without any penalty or loss of privilege. Although there are no anticipated long-term risks or discomforts, students who do experience any discomfort or emotional distress, please contact counseling services at \_\_\_\_\_. The interview will be conducted at a place and time that is most convenient for you. Your participation in this study will contribute to the study of how academic and social experiences in and outside of school affect attitudes and academic achievement. The results may help schools determine necessary interventions and provide them in order to improve the experiences of students. All of the information provided by you will be strictly confidential. No names will be used anywhere in the results. It is guaranteed that no one other than me, Nour Fakhoury, Graduate Student of Sociology at Eastern Michigan University and my faculty sponsors Dr. Kristine Ajrouch and Dr. Solange Simoes, Professors of Sociology at Eastern Michigan University, will have access to the audiotapes. Security measures will be used to guarantee confidentiality and audiotapes will be deleted after transcription. You will receive a \$10 Target gift card as compensation for participating.

If you decide not to complete the entire interview, the responses that were given prior to your withdrawal will be used unless otherwise indicated by you. There is no penalty if you refuse to participate in this research. Findings will be shared with all interested subjects, schools and participants. Results may also be disseminated through scholarly outlets including conferences and publication. This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee for use from 1/25/2012 to 1/24/2013. If you have questions about the approval process please contact Dr. Deb de Laski-Smith (734.487.0042, Interim Dean of the Graduate School and Administrative Co-chair of UHSRC, human.subjects@emich.edu). You may ask questions about this study and expect honest answers. You may contact me (517-374-4280, nfakhour@emich.edu), Dr. Kristine Ajrouch (734-487-0012, kajrouch@emich.edu) or Dr. Solange Simoes (734-487-0012, ssimoes@emich.edu) at Eastern Michigan University.

Do you agree to participate in this research study?

Yes  No

Student signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you agree to be audio-taped?

Yes  No

Student/Participant signature: \_\_\_\_\_

