Conceptions of volunteerism among recent African Immigrants in Canada: Implications for democratic citizenship education

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Introduction

This study[2] seeks to contribute more knowledge to the debate of citizenship education, in particular, civic engagement and integration of recent African immigrants to Canada. For the purpose of this study, **recent African immigrants** are those who have been in Canada for 10 years or less, whose last country of residence was in Africa, and who are Black. It also adds to the academic literature on volunteerism among this population segment in the Maritime Provinces of Canada. Volunteerism in Canada has its historical roots from the 18th and 19th centuries when the Aboriginals and First Nations People welcomed and helped European settlers to survive by giving out food, teaching them how to forage, paddle canoes and travel on snowshoes (Lautenschlager, 1992). A Canadian concept of volunteerism is consequently premised on loving neighbors, upholding charitable values or simply the fortunate helping the less fortunate (Lautenschlager, 1992). Certainly, this practice has developed into a culture of creating several immigrant support volunteer organizations across Canada.

It is useful to explore volunteerism as the key concept under discussion and as a form of democratic civic participation. In this study we define volunteerism as one's involvement in groups such as neighborhood associations, faith-based groups, educational associations and ethnic groups, and participation in overseas or international humanitarian work designed as a response to natural or man-made disasters. Volunteerism is also viewed as socially unique because it often entails the act of helping or giving without a sense of reciprocity (Helly, 1997 and Reed & Selbee, 2001).

 Several studies have investigated the trends and patterns of volunteerism among immigrants in different parts of Canada, but there is little focus on recent African immigrants in the Maritime Provinces of Canada (Abdul-Razzaq, 2007; Chareka, 2005; Chareka &, Sears, 2005, 2006; Denis, 2006; Nyemah, 2007 and Ramakrishnan, K. & Viramontes, 2006). One would argue that such research is necessary given the contention that citizenship education seeks

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to promote citizens' involvement in all aspects of democratic participation to promote a healthy democratic society. There are various forms of democratic participation ranging from voting, running for political office, protesting, volunteering and others.

In the past several years, significant new policies and programs in civic education geared toward volunteering have been developed and implemented in various countries such as England, Russia, Japan and Hong Kong, South Africa and Zimbabwe to name a few. An important aspect for most of these programs is the notion and desire to developing citizens' commitment to civic participation. However research on citizenship in respect conceptions of volunteering as a form of civic engagement among recent African immigrants is still very limited, especially in the Maritime Provinces of Canada. In order to be effective, civic education programs with regards to the volunteerism of immigrants have to be developed with some attention to the conceptions recent immigrants already possess. In other words, their prior knowledge is paramount to the whole process developing the programs, teaching and learning situations.

There is a strong relationship between volunteerism and the integration of recent immigrants into their host society. Ksienski (2004) argues that there is a connection between volunteering and job search by immigrants. African immigrants in the Maritime Provinces of Canada are challenged by a phenomenon of unemployment regardless of how long they have been in the region, and how educated they are. This phenomenon of unemployment among African immigrants stands in sharp contrast to immigrants of other ethnic backgrounds within the Maritime region.

Investigating the trends and patterns of volunteerism among recent African immigrants in the Maritime provinces is relevant because it provides an opportunity for policy makers and those in academia to comprehend the process of inclusion and integration from the vantage point of volunteerism and civic participation. Moreover, African immigrants represent a significant proportion of the total immigrant population of the region. For example, between 2002 and 2006, the highest number of immigrants (38.2%) who arrived in Nova Scotia came from the regions of Africa and the Middle East, followed by immigrants (28.14%) from the regions of Asia, Australia and the Pacific (Nova Scotia Office of Immigration, 2007). Comprehending the social and political behavior of this segment of new Canadians is critical in a region where the impact of immigration is intertwined with political, socio-economic and cultural development.

Therefore, the questions we pose are: What do we know about volunteerism among these recent African immigrants in the Maritime Provinces? What is their prior knowledge on the concept of volunteerism as they arrive in their host country? Why do they volunteer or not volunteer? How are they included and integrated into the political, socio-economic and cultural social fabric of their new society?

The study, selection of participants and research approach

Twenty participants[3] were involved in this study as shown below in Table 1 age and gender, in Table 2 by country of origin and gender, in Table three by their status in Canada and gender.

Table 1

Recent Immigrants by Age and Gender

Age	Females	Males	Total
Adults (30 years old and above)	5	5	10
Youth (16-24 years old)	6	4	10
Total number of recent African immigrants	11	9	20

Table 2

Recent Immigrants by Country of Origin and Gender

Country of Origin	Females	Males	Total
Kenya	4	5	9
Rwanda	2	2	4
Ghana	3	1	4
Tanzania	1	1	2
Botswana	1	0	1
Total	11	9	20

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[3]See Chareka, O. (September, 2005). *Conceptions of Democratic Participation among Recent African Immigrants and Native-born Canadians*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB.

Table 3

Recent African Immigrants by Status in Canada and Gender

Status	Females	Males	Total
Landed immigrants	6	5	11
Canadian citizens	3	2	5
Refugees	2	2	4
Total	11	9	20

As we were interested in uncovering recent African immigrants' conceptions of volunteerism as one form of democratic participation, we used phenomenographic approach to the research (Marton, 1981). Phenomenography is "an empirically based approach that aims to identify the qualitatively different ways in which different people experience, conceptualize, perceive and understand various kinds of phenomena" (Marton as cited in Richardson, 1999, p.53). The phenomenographic interviews were focused on semi-projective stimuli designed to provoke the interviewee into speaking about the concept under study (Webb, 1997). In our case, the stimuli consisted of a set of pictures culled from popular media depicting various ways of volunteering.

The interviews began with participants choosing one of the stimuli and a conversation ensued exploring the reasons for selecting that particular picture from the set of pictures as opposed to others. Marton (1984, p. 27) argues that phenomenographic interviews should follow from participants' comments and should not have too many questions made up in advance. We followed these procedures allowing each interviewee to set the direction for their interviews.

The interviews were taped and transcribed. In phenomenography, the data is treated as a whole rather than as separate transcripts and the first step in analysis is to identify utterances. An utterance is a portion of a sentence that describes the phenomenon under study. It is also defined as "a verbal manifestation that conveys a meaning or evidence of understanding" (Philip, 1976, p.7). In this study, an utterance was any word or phrase within a sentence related to and reflecting an understanding of volunteerism in relation to democratic civic engagement, and inclusion and integration of recent immigrants. Repeating or recurring points of view or ideas were identified in the utterances, and were clustered and classified into categories of description. These categories of description became the basis for describing the qualitatively different conceptions of volunteerism held by the participants.

Findings and discussion

According to Ksienski, (2004) immigrants define volunteerism as "help" or work without pay. The author further contends that immigrants often choose to volunteer to enhance their skills and gain experience in their new country. Ksienski argues there is a connection between volunteering and job search by immigrants. A key implication here is that immigrants use volunteerism as an entry point into the labour market of their host society. Understanding volunteering to maximize one's opportunities and for work experience was a common trend among some of the recent African immigrants. Most of the recent immigrants said they participate in order to maximize their academic and job opportunities by enhancing their resumés and maximizing their opportunities in getting scholarship awards. This is clearly reflected in the following excerpt by one of the youth participants:

Interviewer: Why do you like to volunteer?

Participant: It looks good on a resumé. Sometimes I think if you want to renew a scholarship sometimes they require you to have a kind of volunteering experience. They will say volunteering experience is required in order for you to get this scholarship.

Some adult participants, both males and females, also said they choose volunteering so that they get good experience that can be valuable and start to build their resumés. Statistics Canada (2001) claims that many immigrants increasingly volunteer for the purposes of finding paid employment, which is echoed by several authors (Couton, 2002 and Teo, 2004). Schugurensky, Slade and Luo (2008) expand this claim by arguing that a key reason for volunteerism by immigrants in searching for employment is due to a lack of recognition of their education upon arrival in Canada. This lack of recognition of foreign education acquired by immigrants is a critical barrier affecting their ability to get employed in post-migration Canada. A study commissioned by Nova Scotia Department of Education (2004) makes similar conclusions. This view is well summarized in this conversation with one adult participant:

Interviewer: So, do you see yourself in a position to volunteer?

Response: Oh yes, I've done it several times. Uh… when I was in Vancouver I was um… a volunteer with the Salvation Army and as a matter of fact, it was after volunteering with them that they offered me a job, with the Salvation Army at the food bank.

Interviewer: Why do you like to volunteer?

Response: Oh well… the thing about it is that there are several things about volunteering in this country… um, first of all it's a way of building up your resumé… you see, when you arrive in this country you need to understand the system. Because you are not among your own people so you start from scratch, you credentials and academic qualifications in most cases are not valued. And if you come and you don't meet the right who people who

tell you the right things to do and you go and you start searching for work just to bring your resumé and nothing shows up. You can do it many times as before, and you go home and you say … oh it's because I'm Black … that's why they didn't give me the job. So for me, when I first started looking for a job, that was one of the first things that the preacher made me aware of. It initially sounded strange to me that for me to get a job I have to volunteer! But it worked like magic, after volunteering with the Salvation Army … within months I got a position.

From another analytical perspective, Helly (1997) argues that some immigrants have a preference for informal volunteering over formal volunteering. This could be because formal volunteerism, or participating in activities of registered organizations often requires an official commitment to a defined number of hours per week or month, which is contrary to the less structured format of informal volunteerism. This preference for informal volunteerism appears paradoxical, given that formal volunteerism, or working in registered organizations could easily be used as a pathway for immigrants to enter the labor market. Yet some recent immigrants prefer informal volunteering, especially helping their family members. All five adult recent African immigrant women, for example, said that they would volunteer in the background and support their husbands one hundred percent if they decide to run a political campaign for an elected office, even though they are not interested in this type of politics themselves. One woman said, "If my husband says he wants to go into politics, I will support him hundred percent. Here I am talking like an African woman, I am his wife, I am there for him, and I have to support him in the background."

Some of the participants understood volunteerism as something that is part of a person and that it comes from within. Volunteerism for these participants had to do with making a positive change, an impact, or making a difference in their community. For the most part, participants talked of making a material difference in the life conditions of the poor or less fortunate in Canada or overseas back in their own former African countries. We felt that they were volunteering as highly engaged global citizens. These participants generally situated volunteering as an avenue to make a difference which brings satisfaction. For example, most of the recent adult African immigrants expressed this type of participation as something that comes automatically as soon as they realize that there is a need or issue to be attended to or need to improve nature of humanity at large. This approach was evidenced by the following discussion with the following participant, who said that she was doing a lot of volunteering to make a difference in a community in her native African country even though she was here in Canada.

Interviewer: Why have you picked that one instead of the rest?

Participant: I picked volunteers fundraising for the less fortunate people in their community because it talks almost directly to me or about me. Since I've been here, I come from a very poor village in Africa… Kenya … and since I've been here I've been looking for ways and means to help the people I left behind and make a difference, and when I look at this picture with these volunteers fundraising… it's exactly what we've been doing… fundraising… sending clothes back home to help the poor and make a

difference in their lives, so the picture relates to me more than anything else because that is me.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you tell me more about this fundraising thing?

Response: The fundraising… what? Okay, like what we did personally when we collected clothes, we announced that we were looking for second-hand clothes to send to Africa, and some friends put it on the radio and TV, and we got tons and tons of clothes and we got a lot of them. People here in P.E.I are generous and they love me. Now the issue here was how we send them because we have to pay for transport, we have to pay for fumigation, there was so much… it came to like C$7000.00 so what we had to do was look for ways to fundraise. And the way we did it, I offered to cook, because I love to cook. And that's why I'm running a restaurant I guess and we raised the required amount.

Some of the African immigrants repeated the same thought; they will do volunteering here and make a difference back in their native African countries of origin. One male participant expressed it this way:

But for me the certain interest about volunteering is that I am interested in working with the downtrodden, the poor and make a difference… I saw a lot of poverty back in Africa, and it has always been my desire to help and make a difference back home. In fact, for me one of the greatest influences on my life has been Kessling, especially when I read Robert Kessling's book "Knowledge for What?" … Knowledge for what … I am pursuing knowledge. Why are we acquiring knowledge? I mean all these years from Africa… why are we pursuing knowledge? For me my answer to that question is this. Our pursuit of knowledge must be of benefit to our people and make a difference. And for me I think one way in which I think my knowledge in criminology can benefit our people, is to work with the underprivileged, the poor, the lower class people.

Arguing from another perspective, some writers claim that volunteering helps immigrants in understanding their new Canadian society (Ksienski, 2004 and Brodhead, 1999). This is important given that immigrants, particularly of African descent are confronted with a plethora of social and cultural barriers in their new Canadian society. This line of reasoning was supported by one participant who said that when he was coming to Canada, his mother told him a metaphor. She told him that upon arriving in Canada he should carefully study how Canadians sleep, if they sleep facing North, South or East or West, he should do the same until he understands why they do that. So he said he was volunteering as a way to socialize and to be able to study and understand Canadian culture in general.

The Canadian Volunteer Initiative (CVI) 2001 also argues that there is a need to investigate and comprehend the motivations of volunteers, patterns of volunteerism and the challenges and benefits of volunteering from the perspective of the volunteer. In their study conducted across 16 Canadian cities, Handy, Diniz, and Anderson (2008) focus on analyzing the motivations of immigrants who volunteer within their ethnic religious institutions. The study

reveals that the three most important reasons why immigrants choose to volunteer are to satisfy their religious beliefs, to make social connections in congregations, and to make social connections in the community. We had similar findings with some of the participants. For example, one adult male whose background is in criminologytalked about his volunteering activities by saying: "Oh yes another place I volunteered is in prisons. I talked to prisoners … administered to them to make a difference. I do it through my church. And oh yeah I see myself as a scholar activist. I am a scholar activist and I make a difference."

Most of the participants plainly expressed volunteering participation as a way of making a difference in their community and the world at large. Some saw themselves as global citizens. This was a common trend especially among both male and female adult participants, who identified volunteering in Canada in order to make material and tangible difference in the lives of less fortunate people in the communities where they came from in their respective African countries. This correlates with the cultural practice of Ubuntu, wherein an individual with that if more material wealth has an obligation to take care of the extended family members and relatives. We found this to be a complex notion of citizenship, given that our participants are now living in a society that champions individual rights and material wealth and property. Expanding on this African citizenship of Ubuntu, the recent African immigrants believed that an individual cannot be seen separate from the social context. In fact, a person's individuality is indebted to the society. As Desmond Tutu said in a speech in 1999 at the University of Toronto "… we believe in Ubunbtu- the essence of being human, that idea that we are all caught up in a delicate network of interdependence. We say a person is a person through other persons. I need you in order to be me and you need me in order to be you." African communities view citizenship from a communitarian perspective. Citizenship is seen as a way for people to give priority to social or society claims over individual good, as a means of fulfilling responsibilities with respect to the traditions and values of society. We wondered how our participants were able to reconcile the two cultural notions and different meanings of citizenship upon their arrival in Canada. Exploring this concept requires separate research.

It is worth noting that over the years, volunteerism by Canadians has been highly influenced by a sense of compassion – the fortunate helping the less fortunate. show that racism and other forms of discrimination are affecting integration of immigrants within their neighborhoods. Some immigrants do not feel the sense of 'loving neighbors or community.' Racism and other forms of discrimination are affecting integration of immigrants within their neighborhoods (Denis, 2006; Abdul-Razzaq, 2007 and Nyemah, 2007). This sense of racism and discrimination also emerged from our study. Some of the recent African immigrants said that while they wanted to participate in most activities, especially volunteering, they sometimes felt unwelcomed or excluded. They reported feeling that, in general, White Canadians were friendly, but unwilling to fully include immigrants in their friendship circles. Recent African immigrants found it difficult to be part of 'true' Canada, and did not freely participate together with White Canadians, as evidenced in this interview excerpt:

Interviewer: Why do you think they don't call you?

Response: Well I filled the forms to volunteer long time ago. I feel bad because I like to volunteer but they never called me and now, I said to myself relax… they don't want me to volunteer. Well may be because I'm Black or something, may be they think my culture is different from theirs, and so they don't want to take the time to include me in their volunteering. Maybe that's the reason. I don't know . . . may be it's because of my English, because a lot of people say that I have accent in my English and may be the Canadian people can't understand, that's the main problem. Because I don't know why they can't call me. People here are friendly, but they do not want to widen up to other people, include other people in their circle of friendship. Oh they just say Hi, Hi…some sort of a smiley thing, but that's just outward. You can see an expression on the face, but you don't know inside. They need- like open themselves, invite us somewhere, ask to have coffee together or something, and then through that get to know this person and get involved with that person in certain ways, you will find immigrants just being involved in so many things. Yeah.

This feeling of exclusion or being excluded was a disturbing trend, as nearly all of the adults in this study expressed some form of discrimination and racism which made integratation and participation in all forms of Canadian society quite difficult

Patterns of volunteerism vary from culture to culture (Pruegger & Winter, 1997). This perspective is important to discuss given that our study was exclusively focused on recent African immigrants. Researching volunteerism among various immigrant groups in California, Tong (2006) found that race or culture had very little influence on volunteerism among immigrants. In our study, however, we found that there were some cultural differences in terms of how volunteering is done here in Canada than how most recent African immigrants participated in volunteering back in their native African countries. Furthermore, there were differences in their whole meaning and understanding of citizenship.

Some recent African immigrants felt that at times they are forced to participate even if they do not want to. For example, participants reported being forced to participate in community service in order to gain Canadian experience that is required by most employers and now seems to be a Canadian societal cultural norm. Some African immigrants said that they felt coerced to donate money to charity organizations because there is a cultural imposition and implication or hidden agenda of tax reduction if one donates money. Some said that at times, they donated because they feel it is part of Canadian culture and they want to be the same. At other times, they feet it was compulsory, and expected of them to give. For example, some participants said reported unspoken coercion at their workplaces. In the words of one participant, "Action speaks louder than voice. The way my boss collects money for United Way, is just indirectly telling you to give. So I give because I fear to be victimized and lose my job." Another African immigrant who used to work at the same company but has moved to a new job, summarized the whole issue of volunteering here in Canada being different from the African volunteering culture by saying:

When you talk about fund-raising, what I found different about the way fund-raising is done here and in Africa where I come from is that here people volunteer at times to show that you did it. It's not done quietly. Whereas back home you … people volunteer,

people give things and many times you never know who did what. Here, they even had competitions for volunteering things. Even if it's money it has tax implications, so maybe the more you give, the more you save in terms of tax, while back home it doesn't matter. You just give. Sometimes you feel it's almost compulsory to give. Recently, at my former place of work we were supposed to give for one of the charity organizations called United Way, but instead of being given the option to give or not to give you almost feel you're coerced or forced to give because it comes in a personal envelope and you are told that it's going to be deducted from your pay or you write a personal cheque. The fact that there is a personal form for you to fill, we have no option. You almost feel like if I don't do this, what will happen to me? Because it's something you fill out and take to the supervisor, you feel like, it will be known that I did not volunteer, even if the supervisor doesn't say anything, he or she will know that so and so, out of the whole team, did not volunteer. So there is a lot of volunteering done here but sometimes there is a bit of pressure.

 It seems there is a cultural difference in the way people from various cultures perceive and understand volunteerism though more in-depth research needs to be carried out to solidify this claim.

Another finding in our study was that children-youth who had parents who frequently volunteered, also volunteering more than their counterparts. As Tong (2006) astutely contends, parents who volunteer pass on the necessary resources for volunteerism to their children. This was also common among the participants whom we interviewed including parents and children. The children-youth were mostly volunteering or in their view they were helping their parents.

Some studies show that the patterns and trends of volunteerism vary along gender, age and religious lines among immigrants. (Scott et al., 2006) claim that in 2001, women regardless of whether they were Canadian or foreign born, were more likely to volunteer than men. The rate of volunteering among women was 23% compared to 19% for men. Though in our study we did not particularly quantify this, from the conversations held, women talked of volunteering in more organizations and other places than their male counterparts who mainly just volunteered with one organization at a time.

One surprising finding in our study was that none of the twenty recent African immigrants mentioned or talked in any way, or even slightly suggested or showed understanding of volunteerism as a form of democratic participation or conceptualized it as political. They all saw it as helping, a way of making a difference, or something to help them maximize their own personal advancement in society. Not a single person openly mentioned volunteering as one form of political participation except for the one who mentioned in passing that he was a scholar activist. It was even more shocking when the women talked of volunteering by helping their husbands if they were to campaign for political office. These women-wives never saw themselves as being involved in politics or seeing it as political participation. There was a great sense of conceptualizing and understanding volunteering as an informal activity. Even among the men who volunteered with registered organizations never saw it as a formal process or civic participation (see Chareka, 2005, Chareka & Sears, 2005, 2006).

Despite the barriers mentioned by some of the recent African immigrants, they concurred in most cases that volunteering was a way to help them integrate into the Canadian society. Some expressed wanting to participate more than their current levels if Canadians were to be open and become 'true friends' by genuinely including recent African immigrants in their 'friendship circles.' We also found that prior to their arrival in Canada, nearly all the adult participants had never thought of, or had any prior knowledge or understanding of volunteering as way to gain experience which will in turn help them in getting jobs or getting scholarships. The reverse was true for most of the recent African immigrant youth. They were actually surprised, with most of the participants reporting that it is now the first thing they tell any new African immigrant they meet or other immigrants if they are struggling in getting a job.

While our study offers no evidence of what types of programs or activities will help recent immigrants to understand volunteering as a form of democratic participation and one type of political participation, it does raise some important questions for program developers, especially federal agencies responsible for welcoming newcomers, and schools in which most of the youth study when they arrive. A significant body of research demonstrates that prior knowledge is a key factor influencing learning. Ausubel (1968) points out that meaningful learning depends on organizing material in a way that connects it with the existing ideas in the learner's cognitive structures (see Chareka, 2005, Chareka & Sears 2005, 2006 and Peck, Sears & Donaldson and Peck & Sears, 2005). Our study presents evidence that it should not be assumed that immigrants understand a Canadian way of volunteering, or that they are even expected to participate and to understand volunteering as a form of democratic participation. Educational citizenship programs, whether offered by federal agencies or Canadian schools, should take into consideration the prior knowledge these immigrants bring with them as they arrive in Canada.

From research and literature on prior knowledge, some scholars use terms like alternative frameworks, misconceptions, and naive theories to refer to the conceptions learners bring with them to learning situations. Work on young children's understandings of shelter and food, for example, portrays spotty and tacit knowledge, characterized by misconceptions and relatively low levels of sophistication (Brophy & Alleman, 2002; Brophy, Alleman & O'Mahony, 2003). The authors of that work argue that, "…discovering valid prior knowledge that instruction can connect with and build upon" is fundamental to effective teaching" (Brophy & Alleman, 2002, p. 461). The point is not to change immigrants' thinking but to understand their prior knowledge and use it as the starting point for teaching and learning process (also see Peck, Sears & Donaldson and Peck & Sears, 2005). The uncovered prior knowledge in this study about recent African immigrants' conceptions of volunteerism is of paramount importance because it provides educators, policy and program developers with a clear picture of what African immigrants think or understand about volunteerism as they arrive in Canada. It provides a good starting point to develop or adjust the civic programs for immigrants. Long (2002) conducted research on political conceptions of Latin American immigrants to Canada and writes:

> Canadian research on political integration is scant and little is known about how newcomers make the transition toward participation in Canadian political life. Theoretically, we know that newcomers inevitably interpret the landscape of their new country through the lenses of their previous experience. In learning theory, this is widely

referred to as their 'prior knowledge'…. While this condition can be appreciated theoretically, no systematic effort has been made to map the prior knowledge or cognitive schemata that immigrants bring with them to Canada (p. 273)

Our study has explored the prior knowledge of volunteerism among recent African immigrants in relation to their schemata. We found that recent African immigrants often go through drastic changes in their experiences, ranging from their socioeconomic status, cultural shock, education and political participation, to mention just a few. As newcomers, they face challenges in their everyday lives when trying to learn, negotiate and integrate into their new society. As discussed earlier, in terms of information processing, the schema theory approach shows that people are limited information processors, and that they develop ways of dealing with new environments, for example, volunteering decision-making and what it means in the case of this study.

Recent immigrants are often faced with a vague political world complicated by unknown political issues. For example, in the Canadian political landscape, recent newcomers have to learn new political systems, norms and behaviors of democratic citizenship in order for them to be able to perform their political obligations. However, some of these immigrants arrive in Canada with limited knowledge, stereotypes or even ignorance about the Canadian politics. They have to engage in a long learning procedure to process the information to be able to make political choices and decisions. What helps these new immigrants to process the information is crucial. Hamil and Lodge (1986) contend that prior knowledge and affective experiences about a particular concept affect and influence what people see, remember, how they interpret it and how they act. People make political choices or think about it through event-oriented (affect-laden) or memory-based processes. The affect-laden aspect is functioning when people with no stored political information engage in political reasoning based on a present event being faced. The memory-based aspect applies when people are faced with new incoming political information or situation. They will examine and evaluate it in relation to their prior political cognitive structures. Therefore, their political cognitive structure of schemata has an important influential role in the whole learning process.

Some scholars also argue that human beings are not mere reflectors of situations or information. They have complicated minds and emotions that continuously interplay with their surroundings and how they react (Manguvo, 2007). Schemata determine what information is pertinent or applicable to a particular political action (see Hsu & Price, 1993 and Markus & MacKuen, 1993). Yet, the political cognitive schemata might include shared stereotypes, misconceptions, and naïve theories (Byrnes and Torney-Purta, 1995). It means these recent African immigrants have to learn and re-build or re-construct their cognitive structures in order to function in their new society. These recent African immigrants have to select and discard some information, then put it together and categorize those aspects that share common attributes, encode and store them in their memory somehow (Hamil & Lodge, 1986).

Lodge et al. (1989) also point out that when faced with a new political environment or information, people who have developed political cognitive and memory ability (political schemata), merely retrieve what they have, update it and store the new modified information.

Similarly, Hastie (1986) found that cognitive schemata directs people to focus on a specific political stimulus in extracting appropriate information and storing it. Given the fact that democratic citizenship is threatened when society fails to develop the ability and competence of all its members to participate in one way or the other, democratic participation conceptions in terms of volunteering, held by these recent African immigrants as learners are essential to the whole process of teaching and learning if they are to integrate well into Canadian society. Another major finding in this study was that recent African immigrants do want to participate more, and want to integrate in to all aspects of Canadian societal fabric, but at times face various barriers. Participants cited obstacles rooted in racism and discrimination, which is consistent with the work of Kymilicka (1998) who argues that while the integration of racial minorities remains a realistic goal for Canada, Black immigrants face more distinctive barriers to integration. Radwanski and Markovic (2000) also found that Black immigrants face many more barriers than other immigrant groups when trying to participate in politics.

Conclusion

The pursuit of social cohesion is of paramount importance to Canada as a multiethnic and mosaic society. Social cohesion is a juxtaposition of belonging, inclusion, participating, recognition and legitimacy, all of which are necessary ingredients for a favorable society. As a liberal democracy, social inclusion is especially important for Canada.

Social inclusion opens doors for all citizens by creating equal access to the means of good life as defined by our society. Discrimination, on the other hand, weakens citizenship values, grinds down the concept of social inclusion, and under-utilizes the social capital that immigrants bring. Continued discrimination could alienate recent immigrants, resulting in less participation or complete withdrawal from participating in any other forms of democratic life. Thus, there should be ways to fully include immigrants into the political arena of their host country.

It is of paramount importance for a country like Canada which is multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual to make sure that recent immigrants understand and are involved in its political institutions and processes. Educational programs in schools or those implemented by surrogate agencies that facilitate the integration of immigrants should therefore examine and correct the perceived barriers. At the same time, civic education programs for native-born Canadians should also examine the perceived barriers of immigrants, as most native-born Canadians may not realize how immigrants perceive the political system, and why it is important to continue volunteering even well after they settle.

Nevitte (2004) found that in general, most recent immigrants to Canada are more involved in social organizations than native-born Canadians. Nevitte also found that as immigrants stay longer in the country, their level of participation in these social organization levels with that of native-born Canadians and decline as time goes on. The findings from this study offer a partial explanation for the levelling off of volunteerism. As most of the participants in our study told us, they hope to secure either employment or educational scholarships through their volunteering. As they gain employment and settle in, they might not see the need to keep on

volunteering more, except in cases where they can fundraise, or gather material goods to help their extended family members and relatives back in their native African countries of origin.

The study reported here demonstrates that recent African immigrants participate and are engaged in substantial community based activities, though they do not view volunteering as a form of democratic participation or political participation. This correlates with work of other scholars who have argued that rhetoric about alienation from participation in civic life may be over stated, or at least over simplified, and that perhaps there is need to focus on the motives of what we would like to refer to as the meaning and morality of political participation. The results also demonstrate that the participants have limited conceptions of what constitutes "politics" and political engagement, and see their own participation as non-political and simply philanthropic (Chareka &Sears, 2005). Civic education policies and programs need to educate citizens, in this case recent immigrants, about volunteerism and what activities count as political.

Finally, it should be noted that the scope of this study was restricted to a total of twenty recent African immigrants, nine youth and eleven adults, and was conducted in the Maritime provinces. Other researchers might want to carry out similar research involving more participants from other Canadian provinces and territories. The findings of this study have, however, revealed the nature and extent of some fundamental factors affecting recent African immigrants' understanding of volunteerism and the important role of prior knowledge to the whole process of developing, teaching and learning civic education. As mentioned earlier, phenomenography is about describing things as they appear, that is, making deductive rather than inductive statements or conclusions that go beyond what the participants say. Therefore it should be clearly understood that we do not claim that conclusions drawn from this study can be generalized to 'all' recent African immigrants. Nevertheless, further research with other recent African immigrants in other parts of Canada would add important insights to those discussed in this paper.

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