
Supporting Newcomer Youth Through the Process of School Integration in Canada: A Brief Report Highlighting Student Voices

Appuyer les jeunes nouveaux arrivants tout au long du
processus d'intégration scolaire au Canada : un bref
rapport soulignant des perspectives étudiants

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ABSTRACT

Given that an increasing number of newcomer youth enter high schools in Canada each year, educational settings are faced with the challenge of creating programming and policies that promote a positive integration process. As part of a larger study that examined the integration experiences of newcomer youth, four participants were asked to offer advice for other newcomer students and for professionals working with this group and suggestions of ways to improve the current educational system. Analysis of these suggestions revealed four themes: (a) forming connections, (b) support from professionals, (c) appropriate placement, and (d) provision of additional resources and information. These themes highlight areas in which newcomer youth are lacking support and provide practical solutions to ensure that newcomer youth feel more connected to their schools and communities and supported through the process of school integration.

RÉSUMÉ

Avec le nombre croissant de jeunes nouveaux arrivants qui entrent dans les écoles secondaires canadiennes chaque année, les milieux éducatifs doivent s'employer à créer des programmes et des politiques qui favorisent un processus d'intégration

positif. Dans le cadre d'une étude plus vaste examinant les expériences d'intégration de jeunes nouveaux arrivants, on a demandé à quatre participants de se prononcer au nom d'autres élèves nouvellement arrivés et des professionnels qui travaillaient avec ce groupe et de proposer des suggestions pour améliorer le système d'éducation actuel. L'analyse de ces suggestions a révélé quatre thèmes : (a) tisser des liens, (b) obtenir du soutien auprès de professionnels, (c) déterminer le placement approprié, et (d) fournir des ressources et de l'information supplémentaires. Ces thèmes mettent en lumière des secteurs où les jeunes nouveaux arrivants manquent de soutien et proposent des solutions pratiques pour faire en sorte que les jeunes nouveaux arrivants se sentent mieux intégrés dans leurs écoles et leurs collectivités et appuyés tout au long du processus d'intégration scolaire.

Given that Canada becomes home to more newcomer families each year, schools across the country are faced with the challenge of ensuring that newcomer students feel welcome in their new educational environments and are given a chance to integrate successfully (Immigrants, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2018). Schools are an important focal point for newcomer students as they transition into their host society, given that successful integration is positively correlated with students' academic success, sense of belonging, and later development (Ham et al., 2017; Suárez-Orozco & Marks, 2016). While many studies have examined the quantifiable factors correlated with students' success through surveys and through parent and teacher reports (Suárez-Orozco & Marks, 2016), it is imperative that newcomer students themselves describe what is needed to make their integration experiences more positive (Sinacore et al., 2015). The following report summarizes the advice and suggestions provided by four newcomer high school students following reflection on their own processes of school integration. Defined broadly, the phenomenon of school integration centres on the factors inside and outside the educational systems that impact adjustment of newcomer youth, including English-language learning (ELL), academic performance, classroom behaviour, social networking, identity negotiation, emotional and familial well-being, involvement in school life, and understanding of the academic system (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019; Kassan et al., 2019).

Context

When examining the experiences of newcomer youth integrating into high school in Canada, it is important to recognize that a multitude of contextual factors influences this process. Newcomers, often defined as individuals who have migrated to Canada in the past 10 years (Immigrants, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2011), face many challenges after migration, and newcomer children and youth face particular circumstances and challenges (Khan et al., 2018; Suárez-Orozco & Marks, 2016). Social contextual, familial, and individual

factors all play a role in shaping the experiences of newcomer youth, as does the school environment itself (Khanlou et al., 2018; Suárez-Orozco & Marks, 2016). Immigration is an immeasurably stressful process for families and individuals, even under the best of circumstances, but immigrants rarely leave their country of origin under good circumstances since they are often fleeing poverty, violence, or other traumatic experiences and hence may face additional traumas during their immigration journey (Ellis et al., 2008; Osofsky, 2004; Suárez-Orozco & Marks, 2016). Whether or not individuals choose to immigrate (e.g., economic immigration, family reunification, etc.) or are forced to do so due to dangerous or untenable circumstances in their country of origin, having to leave one's home, routines, family, and friends can lead to a variety of somatic and affective symptoms (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). This transition can affect students directly by impacting their mental health and their ability to engage in school and indirectly by way of their parents, who may not have the psychological resources to support their children while trying to manage their own stressors (Ellis et al., 2008; Khanlou et al., 2018).

Outside of familial and social contextual factors, newcomer youth face a multitude of barriers when entering the school system in Canada. Newcomer students must adjust to an entirely new educational system, often without support, which can leave them feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, and isolated (Lokhande & Reichle, 2019; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Stermac et al., 2013). Added to this is the stress of studying in a new language, which affects students both academically and socially as they struggle to complete assignments and to interact with peers (Dawson & Williams, 2008; Kremer & House, 2020; Li, 2010). Thus, language and cultural barriers can lead newcomer youth to become further isolated, which can contribute to depression, declines in academic performance, and negative outcomes later in life (Ellis et al., 2008; Kremer & House, 2020; Ngo, 2012).

School has been identified as a keystone in supporting youth in their integration process. In schools, newcomer students are most likely to have extended contact with people from their host country and to learn new cultural norms and expectations (Suárez-Orozco & Marks, 2016). However, recent studies suggest that many schools across Canada are not meeting the needs of newcomer students, given that neither students nor their parents perceive these settings to be culturally responsive or supportive of their unique needs (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019; Ngo, 2012). This brief report discusses how school systems and the professionals within (such as teachers, counsellors, and administrators) can support newcomer youth better through the process of school integration. This work is part of a larger study in which newcomer students were asked directly for advice they could offer other newcomer students and the professionals working with newcomers, along with suggestions for changes to the education system. The current brief report focuses specifically on the individual interviews with students with the aim of answering a novel research question: *Based on their experiences integrating into high school,*

what advice and suggestions do participants have for newcomer students, educators, and policy-makers?

Methodology

The accounts presented in this brief report emerged from a larger arts-based engagement ethnography that was undertaken to unearth the process of school integration from the perspectives of newcomer youth within a high school in a large Canadian city (ABEE; Goopy & Kassan, 2019; Kassan et al., 2020). ABEE has been proposed as a methodology that privileges the voice and the knowledge of participants. The goal of ABEE is to ensure that participants are able to tell the stories most important to them and that researchers are able to interpret and understand these stories. In ABEE, check-ins occur with participants throughout the process, and their voices are prioritized through the use of cultural probes (items such as cameras, sketchbooks, and maps are used to encourage participants to express themselves in a myriad of ways), qualitative interviews (to check in about a researcher's assumptions about a participant's probes), and focus groups (to explore further and to verify the themes discussed in an interview). Each phase is related to the next, in that a participant's cultural probes guide their individual interview, and themes across individual interviews guide the focus group discussions. For a more detailed account of ABEE and the exact methodology used in the larger study, see Kassan et al. (2020).

It is important to note that the study focused on the suggestions and the advice given by students in their individual interviews, so the cultural probe and focus group data were not used in this report directly. Still, the overall process of ABEE contributed to the responses of students, in the sense that the cultural probes influenced the individual interviews and the focus groups were utilized to check in with participants about the information they shared in interviews. These continuous, informal check-ins also contributed to the trustworthiness of the study, given that participant validation was done on an ongoing basis. For example, in one of the focus groups, participants elaborated on the experiences they had shared in their individual interviews with teachers and administrators and clarified which traits demonstrated by their teachers had made the participants feel supported.

Participants' responses were transcribed and analyzed using an ethnographic analysis outlined by Saldaña (2014) and Wolcott (1994). The transcripts were read three times by the primary author: first to obtain a sense of the overall experiences of the participants, second to create initial codes, and third to evaluate the transcripts from a social justice perspective (Stewart, 2014) in order to identify specific cultural factors that played a role in the participants' experiences. The initial codes were verified by an outside researcher familiar with the methodology

of this study but not with this particular study. Finally, the codes were compared across participants and sorted into the themes outlined in the results section.

Researcher Positionality

While there were several researchers involved in this project, the data were collected primarily by two graduate students completing their master's degrees in counselling psychology. The analysis of the data was completed primarily by one of these graduate students and was reviewed by faculty members in the same counselling psychology program. The primary researcher in this study and its first author is a female, white, cisgender individual who is not a newcomer or an immigrant in Canada. Therefore, she and several of the other authors were outsiders to this research in many ways. One of the reasons ABEE was chosen for this project was that it encourages responsiveness and reflexivity in researchers (Goopy & Kassan, 2019; Kassan et al., 2018). This is due partially to the design of ABEE, given that the use of cultural probes prior to the interviews and focus groups allows participants to set the direction of the research. That said, researchers are also encouraged to reflect on their own backgrounds and on the biases they bring to the research. Therefore, throughout this research, the primary authors engaged in many reflection activities in order to ensure that they were aware of their pre-existing beliefs and of the effect of these beliefs on the research. These activities included (but were not limited to) conversations held before and during the data collection to help researchers analyze their beliefs, journals kept while the researchers collected and analyzed data, and an autoethnography completed by the primary researcher prior to the start of data collection.

Results

Participants included four newcomer students identified here by pseudonyms. These four students were selected from the larger study because they were part of a single cohort of students from one school (they completed their individual interviews in the same time frame and participated in focus groups together). All participants were asked by the primary researcher for their advice and suggestions during their interviews. Participants all attended a large high school (over 1,000 students) in a major metropolitan city in Canada. The school has a large percentage of immigrant students and as such has many supports in place for newcomers, including English as a second language (ESL) programs and classes as well as programs that support newcomers' social and emotional well-being as they integrate into the school community (e.g., friendship clubs).

At the time the research was completed, Grade 10 student Rosa (age 15), Grade 12 student Gabriel (age 18), and Grade 12 student Mico (age 17) had migrated from the Philippines with their families, whereas Grade 12 student Liem (age 17) had migrated from Vietnam on his own and lived with a host family. All of the

participants identified as immigrants and had been in Canada between 3 months and 7 years. In light of the fact that the participants had been living in Canada for different lengths of time, each of them had a unique perspective on the integration process and distinct pieces of advice to offer. Many of their experiences and suggestions were clustered around similar patterns, under four themes: (1) forming connections, (2) support from professionals, (3) appropriate placement, and (4) provision of additional resources and information. Taken together, these four themes highlight some of the challenges that newcomer youth encounter and form the basis for several practical suggestions for meeting these challenges.

Forming Connections

When asked for advice for other newcomers, participants shared several ideas for easing the process of school integration, many of which centred on the idea of overcoming fear in order to form connections. Participants advised other newcomers to leave their comfort zones, to try to talk to new people, to get involved in their communities, to ask for help when needed, and to practise their English whenever possible. For example, Rosa suggested, “Don’t be afraid to go out from your comfort zone. . . . If you’re not well in English, just keep on talking anyways. You’ll get better.” Rosa added that if newcomers encounter bullies, they should “ignore them.” Liem spoke about the importance of practising English and of making sure that newcomers are prepared for winter, with lots of warm clothes: “Study English, and if you came to Canada, you need to have enough warm for you to survive.” Mico also suggested that newcomers should challenge themselves “to become better” by “leav[ing] your comfort zone.” Additionally, Mico advised newcomer peers to use “the resources that are available.” Mico added, “Canada is full of opportunities for immigrants like me, and just using the resources and people who are there to help you would be beneficial for you.” Finally, Gabriel suggested that newcomers should try to “just be yourself” and “enjoy high school.”

Support From Professionals

Participants also offered advice to professionals working with newcomers, such as teachers, counsellors, and administrative staff members in schools. This advice centred on the need for professionals to be understanding of the difficulties that newcomer students might be facing, such as navigating a new culture. In the interview with her, Rosa noted that many newcomer students struggle to understand the norms and cultural expectations of their peers (e.g., understanding certain colloquial sayings), and this can lead to difficulties in forming connections. Therefore, Rosa suggested that it may be helpful for teachers to talk about culture with students, specifically the differences between Canadian and other cultures, so that newcomer students and non-newcomer students can understand each other’s backgrounds better.

The participants also had some general advice for teachers that is applicable to both newcomer and non-newcomer students but is especially important for newcomer students. This advice centred on teachers and administrators being approachable and understanding of students' unique experiences. Participants suggested that newcomer students may be dealing with a lot of issues, both in and out of school, so it is helpful when teachers demonstrate patience and understanding. Gabriel gave an example of a counsellor who supported him during his junior high years and described the impact of her emotional support:

There's one counsellor from [school] who helped me and she gave me an emotional and mental support, I guess, because back then it was really hard for me to find a platform where I can be a newcomer, but in the sense of these things are happening around me. I confided with her about a lot of things.

Rosa also suggested that school personnel need to be more approachable and to take initiative with students, given that newcomers may be shy or afraid to approach them:

Sometimes [teachers] have [to take] the initiative to talk to you. "Are you okay? Have you adjusted a little bit?" And it kind of really helps me a lot 'cause oh, I can do this! I can do this! With this people, [teachers] help, they encourage me to do more better so it's kind of nice to have them.

Finally, Liem described a school administrator who had affected his perception of school in Canada positively by demonstrating a personal interest in his well-being: "When I first came here, he [was] like, 'Hey, young man, how's it going?' He invite[d] me and my custodian inside his office [to] talk. He [made] me feel energetic."

Appropriate Placement

Participants also shared suggestions for ways in which the education system could be adjusted to make things easier for newcomer students. The first theme centred on the need for appropriate placement of newcomer students. Participants stressed that newcomer students need to be placed in classes that match their academic level and their ELL abilities. For example, Liem spoke about his frustration with being placed in a course below his academic abilities. "I'm in the Math 20, but some of the knowledge at the Math 30 I already learned, so I want [the] challenge of the Math 30 ... but they didn't allow me." Participants also spoke about the need to transition newcomer students into the regular curriculum gradually, given that it can be jarring to enter regular classes without the support that exists in ELL classes. For example, Rosa reported that she struggled with writing essays in her English classes after she had stopped receiving ELL support.

Provision of Resources and Information

The second theme that arose in the participants' suggestions for changes to the education system was the need for increased resources and information. Participants suggested stocking libraries with more textbooks to allow students to learn on their own, ensuring that newcomer students have someone to show them around their new surroundings, and making information about school routines and expectations more accessible. Participants also mentioned that schools could offer clear and accessible information about how to apply to university. Rosa suggested that having a designated spot for information about school routines, field trips, and university information sessions would help newcomer students: "It could more helpful if they put it on the bulletin boards."

In addition, Gabriel and Mico described an initiative that they had been working on: a program for newcomer students in junior high and in high school designed to facilitate group activities to welcome, meet, and interact with other newcomers and to support each other through school integration. Mico and Gabriel suggested that this program would allow newcomers to practise their English and to become accustomed to their new school alongside other newcomers, which could create a less intimidating experience. Mico and Gabriel also suggested designating a space in the school associated with this club where newcomers could feel safe and welcome. As Mico explained, "I think it would be more beneficial if we have a conference zone or like a hangout room for all the newcomers, and with teachers involved. There's just that feeling of security and belongingness for newcomers, for new immigrants."

Discussion

The individuals who participated in this study are a few examples of the wide range of newcomers currently enrolled in high schools across Canada. By speaking to students who had immigrated as recently as three months and as far back as seven years before the study, we hoped to gain a range of suggestions from newcomers in different stages of integrating into the school system. While each of the participants was in a different stage of integration and had their own unique experience of integration, they all shared many similar experiences and agreed on many of the factors that had affected their experiences. These factors were highlighted in the four themes presented and provide a starting point for schools and professionals supporting newcomer students.

The areas for improvement identified by the participants align with the findings of previous literature about newcomer communities. For example, the participants suggested that there is a need for teachers and staff members to reach out to newcomer students because they seldom feel comfortable initiating contact (Lokhande & Reichle, 2019; Mendenhall et al., 2017). As well, the participants stated that there is a need for more support for newcomer students in the first few

weeks of attending a new school, since new expectations and the physical environment can be overwhelming (Makarova & Birman, 2016; Schachner et al., 2017). Still, despite existing knowledge of these needs and the presence of a newcomer welcome program at the students' high school, the participants still experienced worry, fear, and isolation during their first weeks. This suggests that the programming in place to welcome and support newcomer students was not sufficient. While some participants were able to identify certain teachers or administrators who had reached out and made them feel welcome, these experiences seemed to be the exception. Additional wraparound services could reduce the anxiety and isolation felt by newcomer students in their first few weeks at a new school (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Georgis et al., 2014; Schachner et al., 2017). For example, a group similar to the one suggested by Gabriel and Mico could support students socially and emotionally by encouraging connections between newcomer and non-newcomer students, as well as academically, by offering activities such as study groups and tutoring.

The advice and suggestions offered by participants for improvements to the education system also demonstrate gaps still existing in services. Participants recommended the inclusion of appropriate grade placement as well as additional resources and supports specifically for newcomers. These resources and supports would include greater ESL supports in light of the challenges the participants had faced integrating into the regular curriculum with limited ESL support. The program for newcomers, suggested by Gabriel and Mico, is one way that schools could meet some of these needs. Programming to support newcomer youth varies across settings in Canada, and it is often up to individual schools and/or school boards to develop their own initiatives. Creating broader, subsidized programming that could be introduced in a range of educational settings would ensure that the needs of newcomer students are addressed (e.g., programming created and funded by the provincial or federal government).

Limitations

This study included four participants, and their advice represented only one component of their experiences of school integration. Hence, these results should be considered not as exhaustive but rather as a place to begin when considering how professionals and educators can support newcomer youth better. For example, the participants in this study were ESL learners, so their experiences of integration are markedly different from those of newcomers whose first language is English or French. As well, the range of time participants had lived in Canada was quite large (i.e., 3 months to over 7 years). While this allowed for a multitude of perspectives, future studies might examine the differences in experience for recent newcomers and those who have spent several years integrating into Canadian society. Going forward, it is essential that researchers obtain first-hand accounts

of the needs of newcomer youth, since student-centred social justice research is desperately needed to inform policy-makers and practitioners.

Finally, while researchers completed informal participant validation at multiple points throughout the study (during the cultural probe phase, within the individual interviews, and during focus groups), formal member checking was not utilized in this study, in the sense that participants were not given the opportunity to comment on the write-up of results before this study was completed. The decision not to extend this opportunity was made due to the fact that demands placed on participants in ABEE are already quite extensive, and it was determined that the informal check-ins with participants would be sufficient. That said, future studies may want to consider the use of formal member checking to ensure that the voices of participants are not marginalized.

Conclusion

The participants in this study stressed the importance of making connections during the first few weeks and months in a new school. This was evident in their advice to other newcomers to leave their comfort zones and to become involved in their communities, advice to professionals to reach out to newcomer students, and suggestions for a program for newcomers that would support newcomers in connecting with each other and with their community. Since newcomer students face a variety of challenges when integrating into high school, it is necessary that they feel connected and supported throughout the process of school integration (Lokhande & Reichle, 2019; Makarova & Birman, 2016). In light of Rosa, Gabriel, Mico, and Liem's accounts, it is clear that newcomers are currently struggling to have this need met. It is our hope that, moving forward, schools and school personnel can continue to improve their cultural competencies so that newcomer students can feel more supported in their integration journey. As well, as newcomers continue to build agency within their community, added supports and connections would assist newcomers in realizing their full potential in Canada. At a broader systemic level, it is imperative for policy-makers to prioritize the needs of diverse Canadian students and to invest the necessary resources in order to ensure rigorous, culturally responsive educational contexts.

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