



School Environment and Academic Persistence of Newcomer Students: The Roles of Teachers and Peers

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Article abstract

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School Environment and Academic Persistence of Newcomer Students: The Roles of Teachers and Peers

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between the social context of schools, measured in terms of perceptions of teacher support and students' openness to diversity, and the academic persistence of immigrant and refugee newcomer students. It investigates whether newcomer adolescents' academic persistence varies by the perceived supportiveness of school environments. Based on data collected from newcomer students in a medium-sized city in Canada, results show that immigrant and refugee youth display higher academic persistence when they perceive that their teachers support them and when their fellow students are receptive to diversity. Specifically, newcomer youth's educational success depends on a school environment that encourages diversity and inter-group relations and teachers who are supportive of students, encourage them, and believe in them. This study also shows that newcomer youth are more likely to academically persist in school when they perceive that their fellow schoolmates exhibit cultural humility or openness to diversity and thus are interested in knowing more about immigrants' country of origin, respect them, and interact with them.



Introduction

Much research focuses on academic persistence (Adriaanse et al., 2014; Butler-Barnes et al., 2013; Priest et al., 2014; Schachner et al., 2018), school engagement (Molin-Katakoc & Ikola, 2019; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008), school success and completion (Ball, 2009; Correa-Velez et al., 2016; Hatcher et al., 2009; Tovar et al., 2009), and truancy (Borgonovi, 2014; Bryant & Zimmerman, 2002; Goodall, 2005; Gottfried, 2014; Henry & Huizinga, 2007). This is particularly the case for research on African and Latin American youth in the USA (see Chavous et al., 2008; Howard, 2001; Wang & Huguley, 2012; Wong et al., 2003). Despite the extensive research on academic outcomes, there is little known about immigrant and refugee youth's perceptions of their experiences in school.

Understanding such perceptions of their experiences is important because the educational achievement of newcomer youth is an indicator of integration into a host society (Strang & Ager, 2010). It is also a settlement goal for parents of immigrant and refugee youth (Harris & Marlowe, 2011) and a means to achieve employment and future careers for youths themselves (Lawson-Sticklor, 2018; Shizha et al., 2020; Stuit & Springer, 2010; Wilkinson et al., 2014). However, newcomers tend to experience disadvantages in the Canadian educational system that impact their educational outcomes. These include experiences of discrimination (Phan, 2003; Weiner, 2016), working through a Eurocentric curriculum (Kayaalp, 2014), grade misplacement (Shizha et al., 2020; Sweet et al., 2010), and lower English or official language proficiency.

Despite recognition of these problems, few studies have considered the importance of how newcomer students perceive their school environment and how that is associated with students' academic persistence. The present study evaluates immigrant and refugee students' perceptions of a welcoming school environment. It will focus on the role of perceiving teachers as supportive and peers as open to diversity and, in turn, how these contribute to academic persistence. In doing so, the study contributes knowledge on Canadian newcomer youth's educational success and aims to identify interventions to promote yet further success for these youth.

Review of the Literature

There is a large body of research showing that the educational achievements of immigrant, and particularly refugee youth, are related to barriers they experience in their new host countries. Much literature also shows that these youth persist in their schooling despite these obstacles and have high rates of postsecondary education (e.g., Wilkinson, 2002). In Canada, the barriers faced by newcomer youth stem from being streamed into educational programs that lead to lower socio-economic status, including lower skilled jobs and income (Nicholas et al., 2020). This is in part due to rejection or undervaluing of their school credentials earned before coming to Canada, which tends to result in their placement in lower educational tracks in Canadian schools, in addition to their relatively lower official language proficiency, their marginalization in schools, and the lack of diverse school curricula (see Chiu et al., 2017; Nicholas et al., 2020; Sweet et al., 2010). In addition, "intergenerational conflict" (Wilkinson, 2002, p.175) between the newcomer parents and youth as well as the breadwinner role that many youths take on due to financial difficulties of their parents (Shakya et al., 2012) can manifest as challenges in the ability for newcomer youth to focus on completing school. All told, these barriers have significant implications for the academic persistence and school completion rates of these youths, with consequent lower employment outcomes later in life.

As the number of newcomers with diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds in Canada's educational system increases, there has tended to also be a move away from Anglo-conformity and toward multiculturalism, decolonization, and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in schools' curricula and structures. This shift is important in that it ensures students of all backgrounds academically adjust, persist, and succeed, particularly when anti-racist education is institutionalized or at least differential distribution of power among groups is recognized.

The principles of multicultural education and EDI are rooted in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and multicultural policies. Such approaches encourage appreciation of cultural diversity, increasing ethnocultural equity and harmony, and removal of Eurocentric bias in schools' curriculum (Lund, 2003). Accordingly, institutionalization of multiculturalism and EDI in Canadian institutions, including schools, provides students (immigrant or not) with a cognitive framework and normative values to interact with one another in an environment that is receptive to diversity and that encourages equal realization of students' full potentials. When structural arrangements related to multiculturalism and EDI are accepted and promoted in schools through critical pedagogy, newcomer immigrant and refugee students are more likely to feel welcomed and to involve themselves in meaningful academic activities and persist in school. A welcoming school environment in general, and one for minorities in particular, helps students feel safe, engaged in school, and academically successful. School administrators and teachers who encourage students to develop "cultural competence" (Barrett & Noguera, 2008), promote aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005), are culturally responsive to diverse groups of students, and possess and can create a learning environment can help support the academic success of racialized minority students. Such a receptive environment may include incorporation of non-Eurocentric normative values in the curriculum through a critical race or a decolonial approach, as well as supportive teachers and positive attitudes, interactions, and communications among fellow students. To achieve these goals, a number of advocates have encouraged promoting cultural competence among educators, and others have advocated for cultural humility (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). Cultural competence means being able to understand and navigate in a different culture; however, it has been criticized for being a checklist or fleeting. Cultural humility accounts for a fluidity of situations and differences between those who offer and receive services. Having cultural competence or humility encourages and prepares students to navigate the spaces within and beyond the school environment in a more prejudice-free, inclusive manner.

The barriers newcomer students face are consistent with Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation theory, which has highlighted the role of social context in promoting inclusion and integration. It theorizes that policies and programs that provide receptive attitudes towards immigrants in the host country ensure a speedier integration of newcomers. Although their theory is focused on the policies of the host government, broader governmental policies are usually incorporated in school policies. In such a school environment, curriculum and practices promote inclusion and diversity, and minority students feel belonging. These students are welcomed by and interact, communicate, and socialize with other students, and they can, if needed, ask for help from their teachers without fear of stigmatization. Therefore, an inclusive school environment should help newcomers with the development of a sense of belonging to school and to overcome the loneliness from migration's loss of social networks (Oxman-Martinez & Choi, 2014). It also tends to facilitate their academic motivation and achievement, particularly for ethnic and language minority students (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005) and students with limited or interrupted formal education (Montero et al., 2012). An inclusive school environment can help to ensure that no

student is marginalized and that all students can connect and identify with the school and its curriculum (Dei et al., 2000).

An inclusive school environment, receptive to diverse groups of students' values, needs, and abilities, tends to be more conducive to student academic success. In such an environment, the roles of teachers are to recognize cultural diversity, infuse and teach a multicultural curriculum, highlight frames of reference and cultural assumptions, build trust, promote positive attitudes towards all ethno-racial groups, and treat students fairly, all of which can enable students to academically engage and succeed. This approach promotes accommodation of differences, leading to better outcomes. In this regard, Yang and Ham's (2005) macro study of 29 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries showed that levels of truancy are lower in countries that have institutionalized multicultural policies. At the individual level, Nakhaie (2021) showed that refugee and immigrant students who perceived discrimination in school were significantly more likely to skip school. Howard's (2001) qualitative study of African American elementary school students showed that culturally relevant curricula had a positive impact on student engagement and effort.

In contrast, if school curricula or teachers fail to recognize and accommodate differences, minority students may become marginalized and drop out of school. The outcome is lower academic persistence and higher truancy among minority students. Previous research has shown that students who feel isolated tend to display low levels of self-esteem, school adjustment, and belonging (Oxman-Martinez & Choi, 2014; Priest et al., 2014; Rivas-Drake et al., 2008). In a qualitative study of immigrants in Vancouver, Canada, Kayaalp (2014) showed that Turkish students perceived that they were subjects of symbolic violence because the school curriculum ignored minority groups' cultures and instead privileged British and French culture. In a quantitative study, Oxman-Martinez and Choi's (2014) study of foreign-born 11–13-year-old children in six major Canadian cities showed that social isolation was negatively associated with academic performance.

In schools, teachers are the most important agents for ensuring the success of multicultural education and EDI. They can provide a welcoming environment for diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural student groups and buffer newcomer youths' social isolation in the host society. Evidence suggests that teachers' support in schools, classes, and curricula has a significant impact on minority students' persistence and academic success. Students' perception of belonging in terms of relationships with teachers is shown to be an important predictor for academic success (see Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). Asanova's (2005) study of immigrant students in a Russian ethnic school in Toronto showed that the existence of teachers who were caring and sensitive to students' needs was an important reason for these students' high educational outcomes, including high grades, math awards, and college admission. Ma's (2003) multilevel study of Canadian students showed that teachers' morale (measured by teachers' care and commitments towards immigrant students) predicted immigrant students' achievement. Oxman-Martinez and Choi's (2014) study showed that perception of teachers' discrimination had a negative impact on students' academic performance. This research shows that teachers' cultural humility and openness to a wide range of students are correlated with students' persistence.

Much research on academic persistence focuses on African and Latin American students in the USA (see Chavous et al., 2008; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Neblett et al., 2006; Russell & Atwater, 2005; Smalls et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2003). Butler-Barnes et al.'s (2013) study of 220 African American students in Grades 7, 8 and 9 during the 2010–2011 school year showed that that perception of discrimination by teachers and peers in school was an important negative factor in achievement motivation and grade performance. Crosnoe et al. (2004) showed that the academic

success of female Hispanic American students was related to their relationship with their teachers. Howard's (2001) study of African American students in six elementary schools showed that student success was strongly influenced by student–teacher relationships (also see Caldwell et al., 2005; Cooper et al., 2008; Thompson & Gregory, 2011). A four-year ethnographic study by Gibson and Hidalgo (2009) in a California high school showed that the academic persistence of Mexican migrant students was related to teacher support. Studies in other countries have also shown that teacher support is related to achievement. For example, Kikas and Tang's (2019) study of Grade 6 students in Estonia showed that students who perceived emotional support from their teachers displayed more persistent learning behaviours. Overall, the evidence suggests that the quality of student–teacher relationships is related to students' engagement, motivation, and achievement (Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Wentzel, 1998), which are all indicators of academic persistence in the face of barriers.

Not only have supportive teachers been shown to improve students' academic success and persistence, acceptance of diversity among fellow students also tends to impact newcomer students' academic persistence and success. This is because there is evidence that shows students view interpersonal relationships with fellow classmates as an important avenue of their success. Studies have shown that positive relationships with peers in school are positively associated with school performance (Ryan & Patrick, 2001), school achievement (Nichols & White, 2001) and academic engagement (Wentzel, 1998). However, it is not clear if peer relationships among diverse groups of students will make a difference to newcomers' academic persistence. Faircloth and Hamm (2005) suggest that when ethnic minority students perceive that their ethno-cultural background is appreciated, they are more likely to feel attached to the school. On the contrary, when newcomers feel that their cultural heritage is not accepted by fellow students, they may be less likely to form friendships in school (see Way, 2001). This means that cultural humility is important for not only teachers but also peers.

A lack of openness to diversity among peers may have a negative impact on the academic success of newcomer youth because they will not be able to benefit from the social capital resources that are built through friendships in school. Openness to diversity and cultural inclusion in school helps provide positive interpersonal relationships among peers because it encourages students to value diversity and to respect, interact with, and communicate with students from diverse backgrounds. Acceptance of differences can help newcomer students to perceive that there is little or no bias towards them in school, which can help them establish social networks with the members of the dominant groups and increase their ambition and perseverance. Lack of appreciation of cultural diversity, interaction, and communication between newcomers and native-born students may minimize newcomer students' acculturation, language acquisition, and school success.

To our knowledge, there is little research about multicultural attitudes and behaviours of students and educational outcomes of newcomer students. There are, however, a few studies that suggest acceptance of multiculturalism among peers may have a positive impact on academic persistence of newcomers. Brown's (2014) study of newcomer youth in London, Ontario, Canada, revealed that youth identified racial discrimination and bullying as a reason for disliking school. Hermansen and Birkelund (2015) used Norwegian registry data and showed that immigrant students registered in schools with higher immigrant cohorts had a higher chance of completing upper-secondary education than their counterparts.

There is a paucity of research on the interaction of newcomer students with teachers and non-immigrant students in Canadian schools. Although Canada is well known for its multicultural policies and embracing of EDI initiatives, there is little known about how such policies translate

to perceptions of openness to cultural diversity and newcomer students in schools and, in turn, how newcomer immigrant and refugee youth perceive acceptance and inclusion as well as teachers' support in schools.

Previous studies often presume newcomer students are disadvantaged and disproportionality maladjusted compared to those born in the host society (see Liebkind, et al., 2004; Pain, et al., 2014). This is particularly the case for newcomers from refugee or other precarious backgrounds. Such studies, for example, focus on the consequences of refugees' traumatic experiences of war and violence, family separation, and challenges to their identity. In doing so, they pathologize refugees, and barriers to their success are attributed to past traumatic experiences. This view, however, fails to see that such experiences can also result in refugees' adaptive skills, hope, and resiliency, which enable them to deal effectively with stress and pressure, particularly if they draw on the strength of family and community (see Pickren 2014; Simich, 2014; Suárez-Orozco, 2017; Suárez-Orozco, Carhill & Chuang, 2011; Ungar, 2008). Because of these experiences, refugee and other newcomer students may develop social and cultural competencies that enable them to enhance their functioning capabilities and succeed (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). In this regard, Yosso (2005) (see also Kiramba & Oloo, 2019) employs Critical Race Theory to question whether racialized minority students have cultural deficiencies. She points out that such views are exemplar of contemporary forms of racism, wherein minorities are blamed for their lower academic success. Rather, she theorizes that students of colour possess multiple cultural strengths that are different from those of middle- and upper-classes and dominant racial groups but that are important for educational success. This is similar to Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) observations on cultural capital and education; however, Yosso emphasizes the importance of forms of cultural capital linked to social, linguistic, familial, navigational, resistant, and aspirational dimensions, which are nurtured by the racialized communities. These are different from Bourdieu and Passeron's emphasis on cultural capital nurtured among the elite or dominant group families and communities.

In this paper, the focus is on academic persistence, which is a form of resilience that is similar to Yosso's (2005) aspirational capital, which is the "ability and hope in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p. 77), and navigational capital, which is "skills of maneuvering through social institutions" (p. 80). In addition, this study emphasizes the importance of the school context and thus shifts the blame from individual young people and their families to the institutional deficiency that may prevail in schools. This allows us to fill the gap in research that often ignores the importance of the school environment and newcomer youth perceptions of their fellow students' accommodation of diversity and their teachers' support. Such focuses are important in providing an explanation into the segmented patterns of educational attainment that some researchers have shown are associated with racialized refugee and immigrant youth who have lower educational placement and attainment (Abada et al., 2009; Halli & Vedanand, 2007; Hou & Bonikowska, 2017; Worswick, 2004), while researchers have pointed to their higher rates of educational attainment, transition to postsecondary education, and academic persistence (see Hou 2020; Krahn & Taylor, 2005; Wilkinson, 2002).

Methodology

The data for this study is based on a sample of immigrant and refugee youth in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, which is a mid-sized and culturally diverse city. Immigrants and refugees constitute 23% of Windsor's population, compared to 22% for the country as a whole. Windsor has a higher percentage of refugees at 5% compared to 2.5% for Canada as a whole (Statistics Canada, 2017).

There is no accessible list of immigrants and refugees to draw on for a sample. As such, Windsor Young Men's Christian Association's (YMCA) administrative file is utilized as the population frame. All refugees, and some immigrants, attend the Windsor YMCA for orientation and required settlement services. The YMCA's administrative telephone list includes refugee and immigrant newcomers in the 14–25-year-old age group who attended the YMCA between 1 April 2013 to 1 April 2020. These youths were surveyed by telephone, mostly in Arabic, between 22 July 2020 and 26 November 2020, which resulted in 244 completed surveys. The response rate was 36.2%. Preliminary analysis did not reveal any differences in academic persistence among refugees and other groups; therefore, all newcomers were combined and analyzed together. The present study is based on 125 youth who attended school at the time of the study.

Measurement

In this study, the indicators of academic persistence are similar to those used by Neblett et al. (2006), Smalls et al. (2007), and Butler-Barnes et al. (2013). Newcomer students were asked to rank their level of agreement from “1” for strongly disagree to “5” for strongly agree with three statements: *When I do not understand something, I ask the teacher again and again until I understand; I try to answer all the questions asked in class; and When I try to solve a math problem, I will not stop until I find a final solution.* These questions point to persistence and resilience of refugee and immigrant students. They indicate their agency, inner resources, and cultural competencies despite barriers they experience as newcomers and highlight the overlapping characteristics of aspirational and navigational capital identified by Yosso (2005) (see also Kiramba & Oloo, 2019). Factor analysis of these three questions reveals that they all load on one factor, with the first accounting for 58.2% of variance. The Cronbach's reliability score for these three measures of isolation was .631 (see Table 1).

School environment is measured by questions related to newcomer youth's perception of an inclusive and welcoming environment and their perception of teacher support. Four questions asked students to rank a school's multicultural peer environment from strongly disagree to strongly agree: *Canadian and immigrant students like to sit next to each other in my classroom; Canadian and immigrant students in my classroom stick together; Fellow students are interested in immigrant students' countries of origin; and At school, we are taught to respect each other even if we are from different countries.* Factor analysis of these three questions reveals that they all load on one factor, with the first accounting for 53.1% of variance. The Cronbach's reliability score for these three measures of isolation was .71 (see Table 1). Three other questions were asked about students' relationships with the teacher: *At my school, there is a teacher who always wants me to do my best; At my school, there is a teacher who listens to me when I have something to say; and At my school, there is a teacher who believes that I will be a success.* Factor analysis of these three questions reveals that they all load on one factor, with the first accounting for 73.3% of variance. The Cronbach's reliability score for these three measures of teacher support was .82 (see Table 1).

In addition to school environment and supportive teachers, family is also shown to be related to academic persistence (Alberta & Ho, 2003; Boutte & Johnson, 2014; Coleman, 1988; Howard, 2001; Li, 2002; Liebkind et al., 2004; Suárez-Orosco, 1991; Vélez & Saenz, 2001). It is used as a control in regression models. Questions for supportive family were as follows: *My family members really help and support each other; There is a feeling of togetherness in my family; and My family really gets along well with each other.* Factor analysis of these questions resulted in one factor, with the first accounting for 68.7% of variance and the Cronbach's reliability score of .76. Questions related to academic persistence, peer multiculturalism, supportive teachers, and

cohesive family are averaged by summing each set into an index and then dividing the result by the number of questions in each index, thus keeping the original 1 to 5 scales.

Table 1: Eigen Value, Cronbach's Alpha and Factor Loadings

Academic Persistence	Factor Loading
When I do not understand something, I ask the teacher again and again until I understand.	0.822
I try to answer all the questions asked in class.	0.863
When I try to solve a math problem, I will not stop until I find a final solution.	0.569
% Variance	58.2
Cronbach's Alpha	0.631
Supportive Teachers	
At my school, there is a teacher or some other adult who always wants me to do my best.	0.868
At my school, there is a teacher or some other adult who listens to me when I have something to say.	0.833
At my school, there is a teacher or some other adult who believes that I will be a success.	0.867
% Variance	73.3
Cronbach's Alpha	0.817
School Peer Environment	
Canadian and immigrant students like to sit next to each other in my classroom.	0.819
Canadian and immigrant students in my classroom stick together.	0.819
Fellow students are interested in immigrant students' countries of origin.	0.565
At school, we are taught to respect each other even if we are from different countries.	0.681
% Variance	53.1
Cronbach's Alpha	0.71
Cohesive Family	
My family members really help and support one another.	0.857
There is a feeling of togetherness in my family.	0.866
My family really gets along well with each other.	0.761
% Variance	68.7
Cronbach's Alpha	0.756

Additional control variables include self-assessed language proficiency (Ager & Strang, 2008), length of residency as a measure of acculturation (see Gordon, 1964; Nakhaie, 2020), age (Hou & Baiser, 2006), gender (Veenstra et al., 2010), and country of origin (Sweet, 2010). The language proficiency variable was highly skewed and thus was dichotomized. Those who stated that they can speak English extremely well, very well, or moderately well are coded 1, and those who said that they can speak English slightly well and not well at all are coded 0. Syrian and Iraqi

newcomers are each coded 1 and others 0. Length of residency ranges from 0–8 years. Females are coded 1 and males 0. Age is coded in years from 14–25.

The analysis began by first presenting descriptive statistics of the measures used in the study, followed by linear regression of the main variables on measure of academic persistence, and then models that introduced controls. This is followed with a discussion of implications of findings and a conclusion that translates them to educational policy interventions.

Analysis

The majority of participants in the study were under the age of 19 (60.2%), and most were born in Syria (50.8%) or Iraq (15.7%). Other source regions included Africa (12.7%), Asia (17.2%), and Latin America (3.7%). The majority had been in Canada for less than four years (77%), with an average length of residency of 3.3 years. Most stated that they spoke English slightly well or not well at all (66.4%). There were slightly more female than male respondents (56.2% vs. 43.8%). The overwhelming majority were refugees (74.4%), followed by family- and community-sponsored (15.2%) and economic immigrants (10.4%).

Table 2 presents descriptive information for all variables used in the study. There are more females (60%) than males, most are Syrians (44%), and only 18.4% stated that they can speak English extremely well, very well, or moderately well. The average length of residency in Canada is 3.6 years. Overall, these students ranked their family, school environment, and teachers relatively high. On a scale of 1 to 5, family was ranked 4.5, teachers 4.3, and school environment 4.1. On the other hand, the evaluation of their own academic persistence was only slightly higher than the mid-point.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Variables used in the Study

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Female	0	1	0.600	0.492
Age	1	12	5.760	3.236
Syria	0	1	0.440	0.498
Iraq	0	1	0.168	0.375
Length in Canada	0	8	3.568	2.384
Language proficiency	0	1	0.184	0.389
Cohesive family	1.67	5	4.533	0.672
Multiculturalism	1	5	4.088	0.784
Supportive teachers	1	5	4.309	0.765
Academic persistence	0.67	3.33	2.552	0.711
N	125			

In Table 3, the ordinary least square regression coefficients for academic persistence are presented in three models. In Model 1, academic persistence is regressed on school’s multicultural peer environment and supportive teacher. When this is done, both measures increase academic persistence, and both are statistically significant. The first model shows that perceiving an

inclusive school environment through having peers that are open to diversity and supportive teachers is important for newcomer students' success. This is in line with the literature reviewed above.

In Model 2, academic persistence is regressed on controls but excludes two principal measures of concern. Having a cohesive family, being from Syria, and being from Iraq all increase persistence; however, being from Syria is statistically significant. In contrast, length in Canada, being female, and being older all decrease academic persistence, and all are statistically significant. These findings challenge some of the literature on the importance of family cohesion as well as time spent in Canada, which should increase persistence. It is in line with other findings on age.

The academic persistence is also regressed on main measures and controls for a full model in Model 3. In that model, Beta or standardized coefficients are also reported. The effect of school peer environment decreases compared to the first model and that of supportive teacher increases, and both measures increase academic persistence. At the same time, the Beta coefficients also show that these two measures have the greatest impact on academic persistence. Students who perceive that the school's peer environment is immigrant friendly and that teachers are supportive reported higher academic persistence than their counterparts. The attenuation of the effect of teacher support led us to probe the finding further through protected block tests. They did not reveal any interaction effect, except for the interaction between age and school peer environment ($b = .01$; $P = .029$). This suggests that the effect of school peer environment on academic persistence is higher among older students. All other variables have largely independent effects. In terms of the controls in the model, the effect of cohesive family flipper signs was not statistically significant in the original models, and the effects of Syria and Iraq lost significance. All other controls had diminished effects, continued to decrease persistence, and were statistically significant. The findings point to the need to promote cultural humility in schools, both among students and teachers.

Table 3: Unstandardized and Standardized Regression Coefficients of Academic Persistence by Predictors

	Model 1		Model 2			Model 3	
	B	Sig.	B	Sig.	B	Beta	Sig.
Constant	0.123		2.401	***	0.937		*
School Peer Environment	0.352	**			0.190	0.210	**
Supportive Teacher	0.224	***			0.337	0.362	***
Cohesive Family			0.137		-0.011	-0.011	
Language Proficiency			-0.096		-0.186	-0.102	
Length in Canada			-0.063	*	-0.049	-0.166	*
Female			-0.248	*	-0.267	-0.185	*
Age			-0.043	*	-0.047	-0.212	**
Syria			0.312	*	0.141	0.099	
Iraq			0.216		0.091	0.048	
F	22.9	***	5.1	***	9.51		***

R-Squared	0.273		0.234		0.427		
N	125		125		125		
* P<.05, ** P<.01, ***P<.001.							

Discussion and Conclusion

Although Canadian immigration and integration policies have been well intended, an increasing number of studies have shown that newcomers to Canada experience obstacles to integration (for example see Aydemir & Skuterud, 2005; Guo, 2011; Nakhaie, 2020).

Within the school environment where newcomer youth spend most of their time and where they have little power within largely Eurocentric institutions, supportive teachers and classmates play an important part in ensuring that newcomers feel safe, accepted, and adjusted and develop cognitive maturity, which together all help promote academic success. This study showed that newcomer youth’s educational success depends on a school environment that encourages diversity and inter-group relations and teachers who are supportive of students, encourage them, and believe in them. It also showed that newcomer youth are more likely to academically persist in school when they perceive that their fellow schoolmates exhibit cultural humility or openness to diversity and thus are interested in knowing more about immigrants’ country of origin and will respect and interact with them. In such an environment, newcomer youth feel empowered to ask questions without stigmatization. This interpretation is consistent with research that a sense of belonging to school results in higher learning engagement (Osterman, 2000), while prejudice and discrimination in school result in poor educational outcomes (see Adriaanse et al., 2014; Chavous et al., 2008; Priest et al., 2014; Schachner et al., 2018). These findings highlight the importance of multicultural policies that result in integration of newcomer youth through positive inter-group relations and supportive teachers. They point to the benefits of promoting diversity and inclusion in school and policies wherein respect and tolerance for immigrants and minorities are encouraged and institutionalized in the educational system.

Having supportive teachers does not necessarily mean that teachers will critically examine newcomers’ experiences of inequities in the educational system (see Brewer & McCabe, 2014). Rather, it points to the potential trust that newcomers can build with their teachers, and those teachers can become resources or social capital that in turn can amplify the cultural capital and the resilience students already have. In addition, it provides a beacon of hope that educators are ready to engage in professional development programs that focus on culturally responsive practices. By being supportive of newcomer students, teachers can potentially act as cultural brokers and role models for Canadian students, who in turn learn to be supportive of newcomer students. That is, they can help foster cultural humility.

This view is consistent with policies that aim to support refugee students in schools. For example, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2016) encourages teachers to be informed about refugee students’ challenges, strengths, and learning skills. It also encourages them to collaborate with the administrative staff to ensure student success, pay attention to students’ and their families’ concerns, encourage students who are planning for postsecondary education, and help students to adapt to the school environment and build a sense of belonging. Tatum (1997) highlighted the negative scholastic effects due to separation of students along ethno-racial lines where dominant majority and minority students do not engage with and relate to each other. Feuerverger (2011) has argued that supportive teachers should develop a teaching style that links the curriculum with the lived experiences of newcomers. Teachers need to be culturally responsive to be able to teach

and accommodate the increasing diversity of students in the Canadian educational system. They need to develop mechanisms that encourage respect and connections among immigrant and Canadian-born students. Such connections and respect help with positive inter-group relations, the development of students' full potential, and the building of social networks for newcomer students who have left behind some if not all their social relations in their migration to Canada.

Our study did not show a significant effect for cohesive families on students' academic persistence. This finding seems to be at odds with previous research (Boutte & Johnson, 2014; Coleman, 1988; Vélez & Saenz, 2001). Chinese immigrants in Canada, for example, tend to transfer their high expectations of achievement to their children, which often fosters positive study habits and mastery learning (Li, 2002). There is also a folk culture of "becoming somebody" among families of some U.S. immigrants from Central America, which helps academic success of youth among this group (see Suárez-Orosco, 1991). Howard's (2001) quality study pointed to the role of family environment for building academic confidence. Liebkind et al.'s (2004) study of Vietnamese students in Finland showed that perceived parental support was positively associated with these students' school adjustment (but see Alberta & Ho, 2003). Given that our study focused on newcomers who are mostly refugees, with a relatively higher poverty rate and lower educational attainment as well as other vulnerabilities, the differences in the findings with the existing literature are perhaps understandable. Bourdieu (1985) has argued that lower-class students are less likely to succeed in schools where the middle-class hidden curriculum dominates. Coleman (1988) showed that family can provide social capital (e.g., buying an extra copy of the textbook, reading it, and helping their children to understand and solve problems) that can have a positive effect on educational success. However, his observation seems to be more applicable to the white middle- and upper-class norms (Yosso, 2005). As such, it presents a deficit-oriented perspective of newcomer and refugee families. Often ignored is the fact that newcomer parents may not be able to afford an extra copy of the textbook or may not be able to read and understand students' homework in a language that is generally new to them. In addition, minority students may not have high-status cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) but do possess other valued resources and forms of cultural capital and resilience that ensure their educational success. Among the various cultural capitals identified by Yosso (2005), aspirational and navigational capital might be linked to persistence found in this study.

Overall, the findings reveal that a welcoming school environment contributes to youth newcomers' academic persistence and potentially amplifies aspirational capital. For these newcomers, communicating and having relationships with their fellow students seems to be particularly important because their classmates can serve as important sources of information regarding school and its curriculum, offering a means of adjusting to the new environment. Generally, the study's findings are supportive of Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation theory as it applies to youth in educational context. Similarly, the evidence that length of residency is shown to have a negative relationship on academic persistence is supportive of this theory, in that assimilation and acculturation is not always advantageous to immigrants (Zhou, 1997).

Those who advance segmented assimilation theory emphasize the role of social contexts and point to the importance of receptive attitudes in the host society, as well as programs and policies that help immigrants' successful integration. They also pointed out that when immigrants join a well-established group, they tend to acquire networking resources that help them with the settlement process. Consistent with this view, social networks and relationships with social groups in schools are shown to influence motivation and achievement (see Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). The core idea behind this theory is that embedded resources in social networks and quantity and quality of relationships can be mobilized to produce more resources.

In light of the findings, two policy interventions can boost the successes of newcomer and other minority students: first, the promotion of cultural awareness and humility among students and teachers, and second, work toward having strong representation among those teaching the next generation of Canadians. Both will increase the aspirational capital of newcomer youth and other racialized and minority students. Building cultural awareness must begin at the community level. Since school boards and schools are responsible for reviewing and maintaining their policy documents and procedures, consulting with community partners can be a starting point for identifying best practices for creating a culturally aware and competent school environment that promotes humility and understanding. Community partners should be consulted and welcomed into schools to reinforce the diversity of the communities from which newcomer youth come. This would allow opportunities for families to become more involved in students' school life, further strengthening the home–school connection. Likewise, because social relationships with teachers and fellow classmates help with flow of information and ensure opportunities for success, students' academic persistence should increase further if teachers are from minority backgrounds (see Asanova, 2005; Ratovic & Pietka-Nykaza, 2016). This is because, as Miller (2015) has argued, culturally responsive teachers tend to create a positive learning environment for minority students. Teachers from minority and newcomer backgrounds can act as cultural ambassadors for newcomer families, helping them feel more welcome in the school environment. They can also have a high degree of cultural humility and understanding of children from newcomer backgrounds. This suggestion is particularly important because racialized minorities are underrepresented in Canadian schools. By working on changing the structural environment of education and creating a welcoming environment and not overfocusing on the student deficits alone, educators can ensure a true reward for students' aspirational capital.

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