



PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

IMMIGRANT YOUTH AT HIGH SCHOOL

October 2006

"We are a multicultural community and we are here to honour and respect other communities, and if that does not happen through the education system, then it's not going to happen."



Wilfrid Laurier
University

Pathways to Success: Immigrant Youth at High School

Project Investigator: Joanna Ochocka, Wilfrid Laurier University (Community Psychology) and Centre for Research and Education in Human Services

Project Co-applicant: Rich Janzen, Centre for Research and Education in Human Services
Project Co-applicant: Anne Westhues, Wilfrid Laurier University (Social Work)

Project Coordinator: Kristen Roderick, Centre for Research and Education in Human Services

Research Assistants: Brian Sandbeck, Masters Student, Wilfrid Laurier University
Jenni Jenkins, Masters Student, Wilfrid Laurier University
Mahnaz Aminzadeh, Masters Student, Wilfrid Laurier University

Youth Researchers: Liset Torres, St. Mary's High School Student
David Kim, Eastwood Collegiate High School Student

Steering Committee: Maria Alvarez, Executive General Manager, Kitchener-Waterloo YMCA Cross Cultural and Community Services
Catherine Moloney, ESL Consultant, Waterloo Catholic District School Board
Robin Pearson, ESL Consultant, Waterloo Region District School Board
Patricia DeMaria, ESL Teacher, St. Mary's High School
Diego Marquez, Student, St. Mary's High School
Catherine Fife, Trustee, Waterloo Region District School Board
Ines Sousa-Batista, Program Director, Cambridge YMCA Immigrant Services

Address inquiries to:
Joanna Ochocka
Centre for Research and Education in Human Services
73 King St. West Suite 300
Kitchener, Ontario N2G 1A7
519-741-1318
joanna@crehs.on.ca
www.cresh.on.ca

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Quotation on front cover by research study participant.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Pathways to Success: Immigrant Youth at High School research project was a partnership between the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services (CREHS) and Wilfrid Laurier University. The purpose of this project was to use Waterloo Region as a case study to explore factors that maximize positive outcomes (both social and academic) for immigrant youth in high school. The research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

“Pathways to Success” builds on past research by providing in-depth insights into the range of immigrant youth experience in school (not limited only to the ESL experience). As a qualitative study, it gives much needed interpretation to the alarming quantitative data on ESL student dropout rates. It is solution-focused, offering leaders in the Waterloo Region community with concrete “pathways to success” that are rooted in the experiences of immigrant students themselves.

Research Approach and Methods

The study’s participatory action research approach was expressed through its use of a cross stakeholder steering committee to guide the project, the hiring and training of immigrant youth researchers, and the holding of a community forum to share findings and build commitment to implementing solutions. The involvement of immigrant youth was central in carrying out this study.

The study focused on youth aged 16-20 who had been living in Canada no more than 5 years. Students from four ethno-cultural backgrounds participated in the study (Iran, Iraq & Afghanistan; Northeast Africa; Spanish-speaking Latin American; and former Yugoslavia). Four methods of gathering information were used:

- Ten key informant interviews with school board trustees/senior administrators, student leaders in school, parents serving on Parent Councils, ESL teachers and other community leaders.
- Eight focus groups with: immigrant youth (4 groups with 26 total participants), parents of immigrant youth (2 groups with 5 total participants), and high school teachers (2 groups with 9 total participants).
- Ten in-depth individual interviews with immigrant youth.
- A Community forum attended by approximately 160 participants.

Description of Youth Participants

In total, 36 youth participated in the research study in individual interviews and focus groups, 47.1 % of whom were female and 52.9% were male. The most common countries of birth identified in the research study were Afghanistan (22.6%), Columbia (16.1%),

Sudan (16.1%) and Cuba (12.9%). The most frequent languages spoken at home were Spanish (34.3%), Arabic (14.3%), Persian (11.4%), Dari (11.4%), and Amharic (11.4%).

Research Results

Research data was analyzed using an ecological framework acknowledging that different groups of people influence the lives of immigrant youth (friends, school, family and the broader community). These different groups each have their own responsibility in supporting immigrant youth toward success. Research findings are organized under four main sections that emerged from the study data.

1. First Impressions: Arriving in Canada

During individual interviews and focus groups, participants spoke about the initial experiences and first impressions of immigrant youth upon arrival in Canada. This included describing their positive and negative feelings and perceptions of life in Canada, and comparing the reality of living in Canada with their expectations prior to their arrival. In general, youth and parents spoke both of the opportunities enjoyed in Canada, as well as the challenges and stresses related to adapting to a new home.

Speaking specifically about the Canadian school system, some immigrant youth spoke positively about their first impressions and experiences of high school in Canada. For them, Canadian high school offered new benefits and opportunities not available in their countries of origin (e.g., more freedoms, better preparation for post-secondary education). Yet other youth also described their first experience of high school as a time of intense confusion and disorientation. This was especially the case for youth who struggled with English when they first arrived.

2. What Enables Positive High School Outcomes

A key area of inquiry for this research study was to understand what enables immigrant youth to have positive social and academic outcomes in high school. This included an exploration of the positive aspects of high school, the motivations to do well, and the factors contributing to success. The enabling factors are organized under three main categories: individual and family level, institutional level and community level.

Individual level

- Self Motivation
- Family Support
- Peer Support and Friendships

Institutional level

- Supportive Teachers and Principals
- Consistent, Quality Education
- Specific School Supports
- School-Community Partnerships

Community level

- Community Services and Supports

3. What Hinders Positive High School Outcomes

Another important area of this research study was to understand what hinders immigrant youth to have positive academic and social outcomes in high school. There are three main categories: individual and family level, institutional level, and socio-political level. Although presented as individual factors, quite often research participants reported that a combination of factors led to negative outcomes for youth in high school.

Individual level

- Difficulties “Fitting in” to High School Culture
- Trauma and Stress of Escaping from War/Violence
- Unemployment and Underemployment of Parents of Immigrant Youth
- Parent-Child Role Reversal
- Home-School Culture Conflict

Institutional level

- Unwelcoming School Culture and Climate
- Inadequate Resources and Supports in Schools
- Difficulties with the Canadian School System and Meeting Academic Requirements

Socio-political level

- Gaps in Education and Lack of English Fluency
- Teasing and Bullying

Discussion

The findings of this research study illustrate the complexity of the experience of immigrant youth. Youth and their families generally have high expectations of what Canada and a Canadian education can provide for them, however, there are many challenges preventing these expectations from being met. Research participants described both examples of positive efforts leading to positive academic and social outcomes for youth, and numerous individual, family, and systems-level barriers to their success.

Additional Challenges

Immigrant youth deal with numerous pressures, stresses and challenges as a result of their experiences as immigrants, in addition to all the other stresses with which high school-aged youth are confronted.

Resiliency

In spite of incredible changes in their lives, academic and social pressures at school, demands and responsibilities at home, immigrant youth show a remarkable amount of patience, flexibility and resiliency.

Ongoing Tensions

Even though some immigrant youth arrive in Canada with little or no support, our findings show that teachers, fellow students, and parents place high expectations on them. Yet a tension exists between these high expectations and the limited supports that presently exist—supports that are needed to help youth meet these expectations.

Lack of System Response

Despite the fact that positive responses to the needs of immigrant youth do exist in Waterloo Region, research data also suggest that there is a lack of a coordinated system of response to help address the problems and challenges immigrant youth bring with them into schools.

Foundational Factors for Success

Research data show that two foundational factors contributing to the success of immigrant youth in high school are self motivation and support from someone who believes in them.

Multi-Level Support

Although interviews revealed that immigrant youth have the ability to succeed even in extremely difficult circumstances, data also showed that the current education system in Waterloo Region does not ensure the success of immigrant youth at school. Successful outcomes for immigrant youth depends on actions from multiple levels of support—from youth, parents and families, schools, school boards, government and communities all working together.

Pathways to Success: Immigrant Youth at High School

Introduction

This report is the result of a one-year research study called “Pathways to Success: Immigrant Youth at High School”. The study was a partnership between the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services (CREHS) and Wilfrid Laurier University. The purpose of this study was to use Waterloo Region as a case study to explore factors that maximize positive outcomes (both social and academic) for immigrant youth in high school. The research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

The research study emerged out of growing concerns about the status of immigrant youth in high school when they arrive to Canada. It follows a recent provincial study, in which CREHS was a co-investigator, examining the issues of early school leavers in Ontario (Community Health Systems Resource Group, The Hospital for Sick Children, 2005). Waterloo Region was chosen as a case study to build on this provincial research, and to focus more specifically on the issues of immigrant youth. As a mid-size urban community with a high immigrant and refugee population relative to other similar-sized communities, Waterloo Region was an ideal location to examine this issue further. Our hope is that the results of this research can be transferred to other Canadian communities as well.

Background

Immigrant Youth in Canada

Cities across Canada have become home to youth arriving from countries all over the world. Over the past 5 years, 240,000 school-aged children and youth (aged 5-19) have arrived as immigrants to Canada—approximately 50,000 each year from over 180 countries (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2004). In 2001, there were 1.5 million immigrant children in Canada between the ages of 5-19 years old. This number made up 25% of all school-aged children in Canada (2001 Census). With federal immigration policy intending to eventually increase annual immigration targets to 1% of the Canadian population (Citizenship and Immigration, 2002), the number of immigrant youth (per capita) in Canada will likely grow even more.

These changes have created challenges for Canada’s educators, for school boards and in the classroom. Canadian studies on immigrant youth show that disturbingly high numbers do not complete high school—46-74% in some jurisdictions (Derwing, DeCorby, Ichikawa, & Jamieson, 1999; Duffy, 2004; Gunderson, 2004; Watt & Roessingh, 2001). At 12-25%, the rate for the general student population is much lower (King, 2004; Bushnik, Barr-Telford & Bussiere, 2004). Even though the demand for ESL services has been increasing, resources for these and other services for immigrant youth are becoming scarce (Iverson, 2003).

As Canada increasingly relies on immigration for its economic and social growth, the success of its immigrant youth represent an important ingredient to Canada's future. Public education has been seen as a way of providing equal opportunity for all to succeed (Education Equality Task Force, 2002). Yet the high rate of immigrant youth drop-outs, combined with the decrease in funding and supports for immigrant youth, raises a serious concern that could lead to an inequitable education system (Coulman, 2003; Duffy, 2004; Ivison, 2003; Lymburner, 2004). Canada is at risk of developing an immigrant underclass precisely at a time in Canadian history when their contribution to nation-building is needed most.

Rationale for this Study

The challenges faced by immigrant youth are only beginning to gain attention. In the past, research focused more on the general needs, concerns and adaptation of immigrant adults and school-aged children (e.g., Berry, 1997; Burke, 1992). Only recently have the experiences and perspectives of immigrant youth been explored.

Two ground-breaking studies led the way. A national study was conducted by the Canadian Council on Social Development (2000) using demographic and qualitative data to understand how recent young immigrants were doing in Canada. The second was a series of studies headed by the Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement (CERIS) and explored the intersection of youth and immigration issues across Ontario (Anisef & Kilbride, 2003). CREHS carried out a Waterloo-based exploratory study of its own under this CERIS umbrella.

These past (and subsequent) research studies highlighted the important place that high schools hold in the lives of immigrant youth (Janzen & Ochocka, 2003; Janzen, Ochocka, Seskar-Hencic, van de Hoef & Williamson, 2000). Many newcomer youth are interested in doing well in high school when they first arrive in Canada (Peera, 2003). School can help them integrate successfully into the Canadian mainstream (Anisef & Kilbride, 2003). Not surprisingly, schools are considered the link between newcomer youth and non-immigrant youth, to English language instruction, to professional support, and to extra-curricular social/recreational opportunities (Janzen & Ochocka, 2003).

Despite this potential, recent studies show that immigrant youth often have a negative high school experience (Anisef, Kilbride & Khattar, 2003). Qualitative studies typically focus on English as a Second Language (ESL) students and have identified three main reasons for their struggle in high school. First are *individual and family* factors including language struggles, reactions to and perceptions of school, conflicting cultural values, changes in roles and identity and inter-generational conflict (Anisef & Bunch, 1994; Anisef & Kilbride, 2000; Cummins, 1994). Second are *institutional* factors, including limited academic practices, discriminatory disciplinary practices, student tracking and lowered expectations (Nieto, 1992; Lomotey, Janzen & Lymburner, 2003). Third are *socio-political* factors such as poverty, racism and other forms of discrimination (Desai & Subramanian, 2003), causing distrust and suspicion of a system that is intended to provide equal opportunity for youth (Scott, 2003).

The Pathways to Success research project builds on this past research by providing in-depth insights into the range of immigrant youth experience in school (not limited only to the ESL experience). As a qualitative study, it gives much needed interpretation to the alarming quantitative data on ESL student dropout rates described above. And perhaps most importantly, the intent was to be solution-focused, offering leaders in the Waterloo Region community with concrete “pathways to success” that are rooted in the experiences of immigrant students themselves.

Waterloo Region has the fifth largest immigrant per capita population of all urban centres in Canada (2001 Census), and has a mid size urban population (500,000). The region has an unusually high proportion of refugees relative to other communities, some estimates suggesting up to a third of all immigrants being refugees (Janzen & Ochocka, 2003). The region has a long history of being welcoming to immigrants and refugees dating back to its Mennonite roots, and has developed a strong network of immigrant supports. The two local school boards host the Settlement and Education Partnership in Waterloo Region (SEPWR), which provides settlement services to newcomer students and families. Combined with a strong partnership team built on past collaborations, Waterloo Region was an ideal site for a research study exploring how a community can support immigrant youth to be successful in high school.

Research Purpose and Approach

The purpose of this study was to use Waterloo Region as a case study in exploring factors that maximize positive outcomes (both social and academic) for immigrant youth. It was a qualitative study that allowed for in-depth understanding of the issues, challenges and struggles experienced by immigrant youth in high school. Qualitative approaches are particularly appropriate for research with immigrant youth and their families as it gives voice to experience, often silenced when only quantitative methods are used (Lord, Schnarr & Hutchinson, 1987).

Four main research questions guided the study:

1. What are the factors that help and hinder positive academic and social outcomes for immigrant youth in high school?
 - What enables immigrant youth to succeed and have positive outcomes in school?
 - What prevents immigrant youth from succeeding, leading to negative outcomes in school?
 - What contributes to the desire of immigrant youth to either complete or leave school?
2. What are the current promising practices or success stories?
 - Where supports exist for immigrant youth, how did they come to be and stay in place?
3. What role should peers, families, educational institutions and the community-at-large play in facilitating positive academic and social outcomes for immigrant youth in high school?

4. What policy instruments and program models within the school system would maximize positive academic and social outcomes for immigrant youth in high school?

The study used a participatory action research approach (PAR) (Fisher & Ball, 2003; Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin & Lord, 1998). Using this approach meant that efforts were made to involve the different groups who have a stake in the issues of immigrant youth (i.e., youth, parents, teachers, school board representatives, others in the community) throughout the entire research process. It also meant that there was ongoing communication of the study's findings, so that these findings could be moved into action. Past experience has shown that a PAR approach increases the chances that research findings will be implemented, and is particularly appropriate when conducting research with people who are marginalized, including youth (Taylor & Fenton, 2002) and immigrant youth (Janzen & Ochocka, 2003; Lomotey, Janzen & Lymburner, 2003).

There were three concrete mechanisms used to implement the PAR approach. First, the study was guided by a community steering committee that included the immigrant service providers, school boards representatives, teachers, parents and immigrant youth (see page 1 for list of members). This committee gave input into each stage of the research process and became leaders in mobilizing the community in response to the study's findings. Second, immigrant high school students were hired and trained to be researchers. These youth researchers could relate to the experience of immigrant youth and were therefore particularly helpful in recruiting youth research participants and helping to co-facilitate youth focus groups. Third, a community forum was organized to share findings and build commitment to implementing its solutions. Again, youth involvement was central.

Research Methodology

The research study focused on secondary school students who were:

- New immigrants (between the age of 16 and 20 and who had been living in Canada for no more than five years),
- Currently enrolled in, or who have recently left (either through successful or non-successful completion) the public or Catholic school system.

Students from four ethno-cultural backgrounds participated in the study (Iran, Iraq & Afghanistan; Northeast Africa; Spanish-speaking Latin American; and former Yugoslavia). The rationale for selecting these groups was based on local demographics (both newer and established communities with sufficient numbers), geographic distribution of world region of origin, differences in migration experiences (immigrants versus refugees, voluntary versus forced migration), and visible minority status. In addition, the study also sought the opinions of members from other stakeholder groups, including parents, teachers, school board representatives and immigrant service providers.

There were four methods of gathering information: key informant interviews, focus groups, individual interviews and a community forum.

Key Informant Interviews

A total of 10 face-to-face *key informant interviews* were conducted. The purpose of these interviews was to broadly address the research questions from a number of different perspectives. The following stakeholders were interviewed:

- School board trustees/senior administrators (n=2)
- Community leaders in supporting immigrant youth (n=2)
- Canadian-born student leaders (n=2)
- Parents serving on Parent Councils (n=2)
- ESL teachers (n=2)

Members of the steering committee helped determine selection criteria and recruit key informants. Selection criteria included: both public and Catholic school boards, expertise and experiential knowledge about issues faced by immigrant students at high schools. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

Focus Groups

The information gathered in the key informant interviews helped to frame further questions to ask youth, parents and teachers through focus groups. The purpose of this method was to give voice to immigrant youth, their parents and their teachers in examining educational experiences of immigrant youth. Members of the steering committee helped determine selection criteria. The following focus groups were completed:

- Four focus groups with immigrants youth (one for each of the selected ethno-cultural groups) conducted in public/Catholic magnet schools¹ (n= 26)
- Two focus groups with parents of immigrant students (n=5). Participants were recruited through the assistance of the steering committee and other project partners, and by approaching service providers who serve newcomer families.
- Two focus groups were held with teachers (1 ESL teachers and 1 non-ESL teachers) (n=9). Participants were recruited through the assistance of steering committee members and other project partners.

These interviews and focus groups looked at the factors contributing to positive outcomes for immigrant youth at school. More specifically, interviews and focus groups attempted to understand the experiences of immigrant youth at high school in Canada, what factors have helped immigrant youth be successful at school, and what factors have made it hard for immigrant youth to be successful at school. Focus groups were audio-taped and summarized both during and after the interviews.

¹ Magnet schools are schools that are designated and resourced to attract immigrants. In Waterloo Region there are presently 5 secondary magnet schools across both school boards.

Individual Interviews

In addition to the focus groups, a total of ten in-depth individual interviews were held with students from the selected ethno-cultural groups. Selection criteria was developed in consultation with the steering committee and included:

- Youth who were between 16-20 years of age
- Youth who had lived in Canada for no more than five years
- Youth who were from one of the four following ethno-cultural groups:
 - Iran, Iraq & Afghanistan
 - Spanish-Speaking Latin America
 - Former Yugoslavia
 - Northeast Africa

- Youth who were currently in high school or have recently left high school
- A combination of youth who were doing well at school, youth who are in school but not meeting their potential, and youth who dropped-out from school
- Youth who were both male and female
- Youth who were both from the Catholic School Board and the Public School Board

These selection criteria were also used for youth focus groups. Interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and summarized both during and after the interviews.

Data from all three methods above was organized and analyzed using “thematic analysis”, as developed by Patton (2002). This allowed for overarching themes and sub-themes to occur naturally, rather than imposed before data was gathered.

Community Forum

An open community forum was held at Kitchener City Hall on Wednesday, June 7, 2006 to present the study’s findings and to mobilize the community in the development of a set of strategies to ensure greater success of immigrant youth in high schools. Approximately 160 attended, including youth, teachers, service providers, government representatives, families, and other interested citizens. The specific objectives of the community forum were:

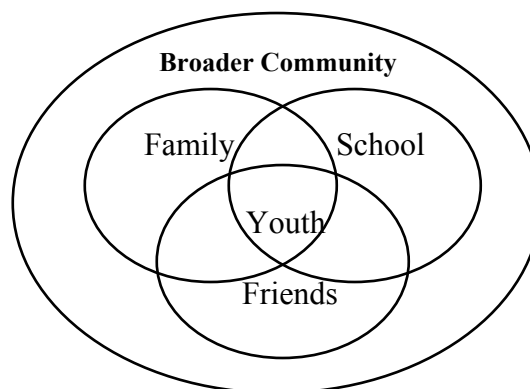
- To bring an awareness and understanding of “Pathways to Success” for immigrant youth in high school.
- To suggest future actions to facilitate positive social and academic outcomes for immigrant youth in high school.
- To celebrate diversity, youth, and youth culture.

Youth were actively involved in all phases of the community forum, including planning, presenting, facilitating and entertaining. The forum provided youth with an opportunity to self-advocate, to provide them with leadership opportunities, and to celebrate their thoughts, ideas, and gifts. Some of the ways that youth were involved included:

- A student from St. Mary’s High School was co-master of ceremonies for the event (together with a public board trustee).
- A student from St. Mary’s High School co-presented the research findings portion of the forum.
- High school youth across the region were asked to submit an “Open Letter to the Minister of Education”. Youth were asked to outline their vision of an inclusive school system, and to identify potential action strategies to support immigrant youth in high school. The letter from an Eastwood Collegiate student was chosen and read during the forum. All letters were later sent to Minister of Education Sandra Pupatello.
- A group of youth from Jacob Hespeler High School in Cambridge provided a series of skits to illustrate the impact of racism and discrimination on youth, and to demonstrate the choices and “pathways” that youth can take to improve their success in high school.
- A student choir from Kitchener Collegiate Institute provided the opening performance.
- A Sudanese band, including some youth dancers, provided the closing performance.

An ecological framework was used (Bronfenbrenner, 1978) when analyzing and presenting the study’s findings. Such a framework acknowledges the different levels that influence the lives of immigrant youth (see diagram below). An ecological framework helped to place the experiences of immigrant youth in their broader context (Janzen & Ochocka, 2003). The framework was also useful in focusing the study’s recommendations, outlining the unique responsibilities that different groups have when implementing solutions.

Spheres of Influence on Immigrant Youth

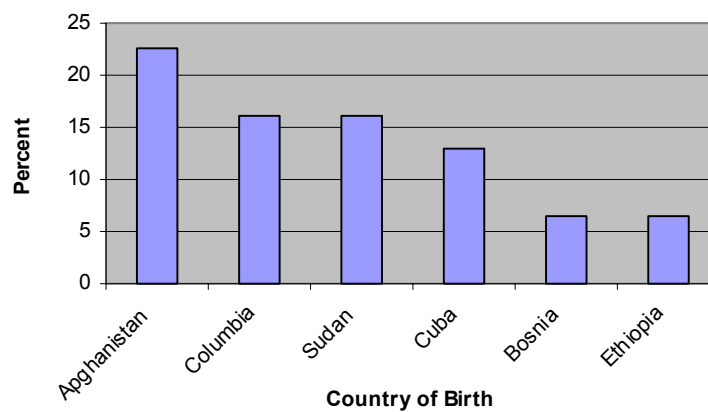


Sample Description

At the end of interviews and focus groups, youth, parents and teachers were asked to complete a demographic information sheet to provide characteristics of the research sample. The following section describes these groups of research participants.

Youth

In total, 36 youth participated in the research study in individual interviews and focus groups. Of the youth who completed the demographic information sheet and responded to the question about gender, 16 were female (47.1 %) and 18 were male (52.9%). Of the youth who reported their place of birth, 13 reported being from Spanish-Speaking Latin America, 8 reported being from Iran, Iraq or Afghanistan, 7 reported that they were from Northeast Africa, and 3 reported being from Former Yugoslavia. The most common countries of birth identified in the research study were Afghanistan (22.6%), Columbia (16.1%), Sudan (16.1%) and Cuba (12.9%). The most frequent languages spoken at home were Spanish (34.3%), Arabic (14.3%), Persian (11.4%), Dari (11.4%), and Amharic (11.4%).



When asked whether youth came to Canada as an immigrant or refugee, 70.6% of respondents identified as immigrants, with the remaining 29.4% describing themselves as refugees. Of those youth who responded to the question, 94.3% were in school at the time of the research study, and 25.8% were employed.

Youth were also asked to describe their parents current and previous occupations. Among the more common responses, youth described the current occupation of their mothers as cleaners (12.5%), hairdressers (8.3%), students (12.5%), or unemployed (12.5%). Youth described their mothers' previous occupations similarly. When asked to describe the current occupation of their fathers, the majority of youth described their fathers as either labourers, mechanists or factory workers (19.0%), while others said that their fathers were accountants (9.5%), drivers (9.5%), or unemployed (14.9%). In contrast, when asked to describe the occupation of fathers prior to immigrating to Canada, youth described more professional occupations, such as business jobs (37.5%) or engineering (12.5%).

Parents

In total, 5 parents participated in the research study, ranging in age from 25 to 51, with 40.2 as the average age. Of these parents, there was 1 was father and 4 mothers, and they had between 1 and 3 children each. These parents were from Russia, Serbia, Sudan and Croatia, and languages spoken at home were Serbian, Russian, and Arabic. All 5 parents who participated in the research study identified themselves as immigrants rather than refugees. Three of the five parents identified being employed, and two identified as being in school (Conestoga College and St. Louis Adult Learning Centre).

Teachers

In total, 9 teachers were interviewed for this research study, 6 of which were ESL teachers and 8 were female. These teachers identified teaching a variety of courses, including English, ESL, ESLD, career studies, guidance, Fast Forward, and math. The youth in their classes were from a wide variety of ethno-cultural backgrounds, and came from diverse world regions including Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe.

Research Results

Research findings are organized under four main sections that emerged from the study data. We begin by describing the *first impressions* immigrant youth have upon arrival to Canada. Next is a discussion about what *enables* immigrant youth to have positive experiences in their new school, followed by those factors that *hinder* positive experiences. The findings end with a set of *recommendations* to improve the success of immigrant youth at school. These recommendations are organized by stakeholder group, targeting youth, parents and families, schools, school boards, government and the broader community.

First Impressions: Arriving in Canada

This section illustrates the period of transition that immigrant youth experience as they arrive in Canada. It provides some insight into the hopes, expectations and realities of newcomers as they arrive. This section also illustrates how newcomer youth are treated and seen by others, and explores the ability of schools and community to deal with, understand, and respond to the needs of newcomer youth when they first arrive.

Initial Experiences in Canada

During individual interviews and focus groups, participants spoke about the initial experiences and first impressions of immigrant youth upon arrival in Canada. This included describing their positive and negative feelings and perceptions of life in Canada, and comparing the reality of living in Canada with their expectations prior to their arrival. The section begins with statements from youth, and is then supported by comments and statements from parents, who describe how their own first experiences in Canada impact on and are inextricably linked to their children's experiences and ability to integrate into new Canadian systems and structures.

This exploration of first impressions helped to contextualize the experiences of newcomer youth, provided researchers with a more in-depth understanding of the process and

realities of coming to Canada, and required youth to reflect on the effectiveness of Canadian systems and institutions in responding to newly arrived immigrants and refugees.

When describing the positive aspects of living in Canada, a number of youth referred to the opportunities that were available to them and expressed the belief that Canada would offer them a better future. Youth indicated that Canada provided them an opportunity to “go to university” and “to be anything you want”. Some youth also spoke about the political liberties, religious freedoms, and freedom of expression, which was not available to them in their country of origin.

Parents also reflected on their children’s first experiences, and provided similar examples of the positive aspects of life in Canada. Parents were appreciative of living in Canada and described Canada as a very open and “blessed country”. However, parents also provided examples of the challenges related to living in and adapting to Canada. A number of parents described experiencing fear and frustration when they first arrived, or expressed feelings of “embarrassment” and “shame” in their struggle to find their way. One parent described feeling overwhelmed by the stress and hectic pace of looking for employment, housing, and meeting other needs of her family. She felt that “maybe we forgot about kids [at] first” during this confusion. Many of these parents felt that they didn’t have the time or luxury to focus on their children’s school experiences when there were so many other uncertain factors and priorities.

“We were thinking apartment... jobs... just sending kids to school without thinking what’s going on in the school.” (Immigrant Parent)

Parents also spoke about the stress related to language difficulties, unemployment or underemployment, the changing relationships with their children and cultural differences. Parents agreed that the initial experience of living in Canada was difficult, and described feeling overwhelmed, disconnected and lost as a result of extreme cultural differences, a limited ability to speak English, and having “trouble solving problems”. Especially when each of these challenges were pressing in on them, it was very difficult to get involved with their children’s education.

“Can you imagine coming into a country [where] you don’t know how to read and how to write and you don’t have any clue what is going on...I spent hours translating every word.” (Immigrant Parent)

“I came here without any single English word... I can’t [go] to school and talk to a teacher and ask for help... it’s hard to call a translator every time... it’s embarrassing.” (Immigrant Parent)

A few parents expressed that despite a commitment to working hard to adapt and learn English, they still felt lost for several months and advised that patience was the best way to learn a new language. Although some parents were eventually able to get more involved in their children’s education, this was not the reality for some parents. These

experiences illustrate the complexity of the newcomer experience for the entire family. Placing youth in the context of their family environment and reality provides some insight about how these realities impact and contribute to their school experiences.

These statements also illustrate that youth and parents perceive Canada as a country of possibilities and where there is great potential for their futures. More importantly, the statements also show that families confront challenges and stresses when they first arrive that can prevent them from a smooth integration into Canadian society.

Initial Experiences of High School

During interviews and focus groups, youth spoke positively about their first impressions and experiences of high school in Canada. During interviews, a few youth identified that, compared to schools in their home countries, Canadian high schools offered a number of additional benefits and opportunities, giving them “freedom of expression” and preparing them for the opportunity to go to university. Youth were also asked to compare their expectations of high school in Canada before they arrived with what high school was actually like.

Some youth felt that attending high school in Canada would offer a better future than what was possible for them in their home countries. For these youth, the quality of a Canadian education was thought to provide them with access to a wide variety of post secondary programs, and eventually lead to more rewarding careers. Youth explained that parents shared their expectations for high school in Canada, and hoped that Canada would offer countless opportunities.

“[Mom] said here is a better place for me... anywhere out of my country is better than in my country.” (Immigrant Youth)

“You have the opportunity to explore yourself... back at home, you don’t have that.” (Immigrant Youth)

Some youth felt that Canadian high schools were close to what they had expected prior to their arrival. The cultural diversity of Waterloo Region, reflected most within magnet schools, was greater than what many youth expected. Some youth said that they anticipated more youth from certain cultures, while others thought they would find a more homogenous group and were surprised by the different faces they saw in school hallways.

Compared to the experience of high school in other countries, youth felt that high school in Canada was very relaxed. Some youth felt that this was not an improvement over a more structured, strict school system, and felt that high school in Canada was relaxed to the point of being ineffective or inefficient.

“[School here is] so different from the kind of schools I used to go to... size, system, way of teaching, the way students dress, the way students act, the way students act with teachers... Students here, they don’t respect teachers and they

don't respect each other. The studies are good, but the people here don't seem serious about studies the way that people in my country are." (Immigrant Youth)

"The bad thing is that they have so many technologies that they don't use their brain. In my country, we didn't use calculators – we used computers, but we didn't use them for every single homework, we had to think about the homework." (Immigrant Youth)

Some youth also described their first experience of high school as a time of intense confusion and disorientation. This was especially the case for youth who struggled with English when they first arrived. These youth described the experience as incredibly isolating, felt that the majority of students were unable to “understand what they [were] saying”, and became extremely discouraged when they struggled with simple everyday tasks like finding their locker.

"It was really hard, because I don't know how to speak English. I don't know how to write, read. I don't know anything about English, I just went to school. I don't have any friends. Everything was new for me, the lockers, the people, the teachers." (Immigrant Youth)

Responses like these reveal the extent to which language acts as a barrier to adapting to a new environment and fitting in. During focus groups and interviews, youth often saw their knowledge of English as key to navigating their way through Canadian society, and the main factor determining whether or not they would be accepted at school.

Although many youth interviewed for this research had some previous English training prior to their arrival, youth also described that having to use English on a daily basis and for nearly every interaction could be incredibly challenging, as well as exhausting. Some youth felt that their communication level made them feel inadequate and even helpless.

"The people who don't know the language are like a baby, like a newborn... especially when you see a kid speaking to other people [in English] ... you feel... smaller than a baby." (Immigrant Youth)

For some youth, the ability to speak English was directly related to their confidence level, comfort at school and their ability to make social connections. The presence of a language barrier often heightened the anxiety of students as they began school and adjusted to a new culture. This experience was often described as “scary”, and many students felt lost during classes, or “insecure” in their ability to perform at school and socialize with other students.

The above statements illustrate that although youth have high expectations for high school in Canada, there are a number of adjustments required of them, making their experience difficult, disorienting and intimidating when they first arrive. Especially for youth who are learning a new language, even small, common leanings and adjustments in

a new culture and country are magnified, making their school days incredibly difficult and overwhelming.

What Enables Positive High School Outcomes

A key area of inquiry for this research study was to understand what enables immigrant youth to have positive social and academic outcomes in high school. This section summarizes the opinions of research participants, privileging the opinions of immigrant youth. The section includes an exploration of the positive aspects of high school, understanding what motivates or inspires youth to do well, and inquiring about what helps youth excel both academically and socially. Examples of promising practices and success stories are given to highlight examples of youth that have succeeded, and to understand the elements that contribute to this success. The enabling factors are organized under three main categories: individual and family level, institutional level and community level.

Individual and Family-Level Enabling Factors

As described below, a youth's own self motivation and/or the support of their family and friends were seen to be important factors in developing a strong foundation for success in school. These factors were mentioned by a large number of youth, parents and other stakeholders throughout focus groups and interviews.

1) Self Motivation

Research participants stressed that an important factor helping youth do well in school was self-motivation. Newcomer youth involved in the research study spoke very strongly about the importance of hard work, determination, and a strong focus on succeeding when describing how to achieve success in high school. Although all of the youth interviewed during this research project demonstrated an incredible degree of strength and determination in the face of difficult experiences, some youth had extra drive and motivation pushing them to succeed.

“Because I have gone through so many different environments, so many countries, so many hard times, that’s why I am not going to let that go, after all this hard work. After leaving my country, going through so many different countries, where I have to learn different languages, I am not going to waste my time. I have to do something that will make me better after all of the hard times when I was little.” (Immigrant Youth)

Some youth also expressed that their motivation to do well in school related to the feelings of pride and the desire to prove their skills and abilities to themselves, their families, teachers, or to other students. Despite the obstacles that many newcomer youth faced, the goal of learning English and doing well in school gave them a challenge that they were determined to overcome.

“To know that I can show Canadian people that I can do better than them in math and all that – because they are always trying to push the Spanish

people... some people are racist, and I don't like that, so I want to show them that they're racist." (Immigrant Youth)

"Last year, I got [an award for English writing] that was very nice, so I wanted to study more this year... that gave me motivation." (Immigrant Youth)

A few research participants also talked about how the desire to learn and do well in school inspired some youth to work for as long as it took. For some youth, the act of being in school and achieving their goals after the completion of high school gave them a sense of freedom and provided them with choices for their future. Even when faced with a number of adversities, some youth were able to stay focused and find the resources they needed to excel.

"For some it is social. I have a student in my class she is 19 and married and for her it is getting away from the home. Her husband so far has allowed her to stay in the classroom, we have a suspicion it is until she expects her first child and then she will be removed. But so far she is allowed to stay and she wants to learn, this is her window of opportunity, she wants to learn." (ESL Teacher)

"She will take advanced every class... except English she will [take in] ESL... she wants to be a doctor... she knows this is her way, this is her road. She is a person who likes to work hard." (Immigrant Parent)

As these comments illustrate, although youth may have different reasons for working hard and achieving in school, their motivation and drive to meet their goals is an important factor contributing to their success.

2) Family Support

During the majority of interviews and focus groups, interview participants spoke about the importance of love and support of parents and family. This was perhaps the most common enabling factor identified during the research project. Although the type of family support varied across interviews and stakeholders, parental and other family involvement was emphasized by all stakeholder groups as an invaluable contribution to the success of immigrant youth in high school.

A number of research participants recognized that one of the most important responsibilities of parents was to provide support to their children. When asked to describe what this support looks like, a number of research participants discussed the importance of parental support of youth at home – through open communication and encouragement. One parent illustrated this as an essential, primary role, which was just as important or even more important for parents to practice after moving to Canada.

"[Making sure they did well in school] had to do with open communication with them and understanding what they were going through, and

*understanding the requirement of their age, which is very important.”
(Immigrant Parent)*

Other research participants talked about the impact of parents’ emphasis on education in contributing to the successful completion of high school. This included the academic background of the parents, the importance parents place on completing high school and post-secondary education, and the meaning that parents construct on how education determines a person’s socio-economic status and future. Although not all parents held these beliefs, some research participants felt that the presence or absence of these beliefs had an influence on youth and their perceptions about and performance in school.

“A lot [of adults] who come as immigrants already have strong academic backgrounds and a family environment where education is paramount and the most important thing. They would sacrifice anything but not the education. Not the academic.” (Immigrant Parent)

“If they are children from highly educated immigrant families coming here for the purpose of bettering their lives and advancing in education, they will do their best to continue that.” (Immigrant Parent)

The majority of youth involved in this research study acknowledged that parental support was an important factor in helping them succeed in school. A few youth described that relationships between parents and youth that were more open and interactive helped in adjusting to living in Canada. Youth who were doing well in school appreciated their parents waking them up in the morning for school, liked talking to their parents at night about how things were going, and appreciated it when parents were concerned when they struggled.

“My dad never, never, ever, ever misses a parent night. We don’t even tell him, I don’t know how he knows! But, he always talks with my teachers, with my counsellors... He asks teachers how we are doing in school.” (Immigrant Youth)

Immigrant parents also emphasized that parents should do whatever they can to maintain a strong relationship with their children’s teachers. This illustrated another way for parents to demonstrate their interest in and concern for their children’s education. Parents were able to describe how good parent-teacher communication and involvement contributed to their children’s academic success. Although it may be difficult for parents to “go very often and see” teachers, especially when there are language barriers, or have other concerns and priorities, making the effort was considered important.

“I can talk with the teachers... I have no bad experience with the teachers... I ask [them to] send extra work for [my daughter]... we can practice some things at home and now she is doing awesome” (Immigrant Parent)

“Parents really should know everything that is going on in the first few months... it is easier to solve problems at home.” (Immigrant Parent)

One school board representative reiterated this point, emphasizing the value of parents’ direct involvement with the school system, and the importance of parents as “partners” in the education process. This participant felt that through parent involvement, the chances that students will do better in school would increase.

“So when the parent is not recognized as a partner in education then there’s a direct relationship to how that student will do in education. This has been proven.” (School Board Representative)

Although parental involvement and support was discussed as ideal to help youth succeed in school, not all parents were able to be directly involved in their children’s education. However, as one key informant described, the very acts of immigrating to Canada, working hard, and setting standards and expectations for children will motivate them to do well in school and meet their parents expectations.

“If the parents have succeeded economically, socially, educationally, and professionally, then the kids are living at a different set of standards... and the kids who’s parents are doing well by the sweat of their brow, who are working in factories and construction, but are doing well and they came here to do better for their kids... they feel a sense of obligation to their parents. There is an expectation...they came here to have a better life.” (Community Leader)

It is also important to note that during interviews and focus groups, a few research participants spoke about the support received from extended family members, such as aunts, uncles, and cousins. Some extended family members arrived in Canada earlier, were more able to maneuver through the system, and provided valuable support and guidance. For a few youth interviewed during this research project, extended family also represented the only family they had in Canada.

“If they have a relative arrive years before and succeed, that seems to have an impact on a lot of students.” (ESL Teacher)

“They go shopping with us, they show us places around... before we got a car, they went shopping for us and helped us buy the house stuff.” (Immigrant Youth)

These comments illustrate that although parents face a number of difficulties and challenges in being involved in their children’s education, there was strong agreement that support of any kind, whether that meant going to parent-teacher meetings or simply talking to children about school, was helpful, appreciated, and contributed to high school success.

3) Peer Support and Friendships

The majority of research participants spoke about how peer support, friendships and other relationships helped newcomer youth in their adjustments to life in Canada. During interviews and focus groups with youth, those who were doing well in school seemed more likely than early school-leavers to speak about how relationships helped them to succeed in school. Some research participants emphasized the importance of immigrant youth forming relationships with other immigrant youth, while others spoke about the benefits of immigrant youth forming relationships with non-immigrant youth.

“We do have a number [of immigrant youth], at our school...who are mentoring younger newcomers, and that’s great... they’re there in a leadership role which is helping them as well.” (ESL Teacher)

Having friends from similar backgrounds, or simply having friends who were also immigrants, offered significant social support to the youth interviewed for this research study. When asked whether they thought their social lives suffered because they were new to the country, one youth responded, *“not if you have friends who are immigrants, who are coloured, who are also from another country.”*

Research participants also talked about how immigrant youth developed strategic relationships in order to get them ahead in school and in their English language development. Some newcomer students chose to interact predominantly with students from the same cultural and linguistic background, while others preferred to interact with students from an English-speaking background. Youth seemed to adopt a variety of different strategies, both out of necessity, and through a conscious effort to adapt to their linguistic environment. Some youth felt that *“students who were foreign themselves were warmer”*, and a few chose to associate primarily with fellow newcomer youth. While the majority of youth interviewed during this research project saw the importance of forming alliances with non-immigrant youth, or of having both newcomer and Canadian-born friends.

“There was nobody from my country to speak [with], so I had to try to speak...English. It was hard to learn it, but it [made] me learn it [faster].” (Immigrant Youth)

“After I made [Canadian, English-speaking] friends, every day I learn a new word. If I don’t know the meaning of the word, I will say ‘my friend, what is the meaning of that word?’.” (Immigrant Youth)

All youth who participated in this research spoke about the benefit of having friends from various countries. Spending time with other immigrants from their home countries gave youth the opportunity to speak freely in their primary language, however, they were also likely to form friendships with youth from other countries as well.

“I have a lot of friends from everywhere but also from Afghanistan.” (Immigrant Youth)

“In my school I talk to everybody. At lunch times I go with my friends from my country and we speak our language.” (Immigrant Youth)

“Iraq, Egypt, Afghanistan... doesn't matter... it doesn't matter where people are from, we're all just getting along.” (Immigrant Youth)

Thus, students differ quite significantly in the strategies they adopt to learn English. Some manage to learn English by aligning themselves with youth of the same cultural and linguistic background who can support them and translate for them, while others surround themselves with people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, to encourage them to learn English faster.

The various strategies that immigrant youth adopt in forming relationships with students can also depend on other factors, such as the pre-existing level of integration between various ethnic groups in the school. This also helps students choose specific friendships or peer groups with whom they can align.

Institutional-Level Enabling Factors

Immigrant youth at high school are exposed to a school system—its teachers, courses, policies and programs. This section highlights four areas of the school system that were seen to have been most beneficial in helping newcomer youth to succeed and have positive outcomes at school.

1) Supportive Teachers and Principals

The majority of people interviewed for this research project spoke about the importance of teachers and principals in contributing to the success of newcomer youth in high school. In many ways, teachers and principals were seen as essential in creating a safe environment where students can learn, gain confidence, and take risks that will ultimately advance their success in school.

Research participants talked about the role and importance of principals and vice principals in developing a positive school climate and in providing direction and leadership in how the entire school will respond to newcomer youth. A number of research participants recognized the power and role of principals in setting the whole tone for the school, holding teachers accountable, and in supporting newcomers and their families.

“Our principal is very supportive. This is her second year at our school and she gives a lot of attention to our ESL students because she recognizes that it is a magnet school. She is very supportive of any kind of support system that we can provide to our students. She is very receptive, very open, she is fabulous really. A credit to our program, I think we can do a lot through this principal.” (ESL Teacher)

Research participants described both the positive and negative impact that teachers can have on immigrant youth, and that they can make or break the experiences of newcomer

youth. Youth described how some teachers were the “biggest motivator” in their lives, that they could be “helpful and open with students”, and how a few teachers were very compassionate and “understanding” of their situation. Teachers were also described as the gatekeepers of the school system, providing students with support, guidance, valuable resources and access to knowledge to help them advance academically and socially.

“Some teachers, you feel comfortable with them because they keep trying...they want you to learn. For example, one of my teachers, he's still my friend... I still go visit him.” (Immigrant Youth)

About a quarter of the youth interviewed for this research project acknowledged specific teachers who had gone out of their way to provide support and patience, for being a friend to them and for believing in them when no one else did. For some newcomer youth, this was the only support they had.

“Teachers are more friendly here, so you can speak with them about your problems.” (Immigrant Youth)

“This year I have a very nice teacher and we speak about life in class... it's like speaking with a friend.” (Immigrant Youth)

Many other research participants agreed that teachers can have a strong impact on the success of students by acting as role models, encouraging them to do well, and giving them confidence. Some teachers were praised for their patience, understanding, and for taking the time to support youth above and beyond what is expected. These teachers helped in a variety of simple ways like explaining morning announcements and encouraging youth to participate in class without forcing them.

English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers were also identified as important supports for newcomer youth. Some ESL teachers were described as being “very skilled” and “very nice.” Many of these teachers took extra time to talk to immigrant students and guide them through the learning process. These teachers were identified as being approachable, not easily replaceable, and having an important role to play in a student's academic life.

“I know that ESL teacher... she changed [my son's] life. She's so nice and she helped him [so] much. When she retired, he stopped [doing so well]... he's not doing the same [now].” (Immigrant Parent)

“I think that a lot of what would motivate [newcomer youth] would be their teachers because that's who they'd be spending a lot of time with, their ESL teachers. I know teachers for non-immigrant youth can be really important should they choose to accept the relationship. But I think with immigrant youth it's a little more important because it's who they can always depend on and it's who is there and who is teaching them and exposing them to new things.” (Student Leader)

These comments illustrate that teachers and principals play an incredibly important role in determining the success of newcomer youth in high school. Although there are currently a number of supportive teachers in high schools, their support should be acknowledged and modeled throughout the school as a standard by which the school is expected to reach.

2) Consistent, Quality Education

Research participants discussed the importance of the learning environment – its quality and its ability to foster learning – in contributing to the success of newcomer youth. For the most part, research participants spoke very positively about the ability and desire of newcomer youth in adjusting to school in Canada and in Waterloo Region. Participants described how the Canadian school system had the potential to offer some newcomer youth greater freedom, choices, and quality of education than they might have had in their home countries.

“Everybody gets the same education across Ontario and across Canada pretty much. It is good quality education so I am sure for a lot of the places they are coming from, school is great.” (Student Leader)

Research participants observed how these changes seemed to be particularly true for youth who were refugees and who had left unstable environments. For some youth, consistent, standardized education was a privilege they had not yet experienced.

“Many children like school because it is free and they don’t have to pay for their education. In their country of origin they may have had to pay fees. Here the teachers have many resources and if the students are hardworking and competitive they rise to the top of their class very easily. Also here the philosophy of education is different - independent thinking as opposed to rote learning.” (School Board Representative)

“The students who have been in our school system for 2 or 3 years feel free to form an opinion and share ideas and know it won’t be judged. I always tell them it’s okay, tell us what you think. I don’t think they are quite used to that critical thinking.” (ESL Teacher)

Research participants also recognized that, depending on the situation in their home country, some youth experienced a number of difficulties and challenges in accessing quality education in the past, and that in Canada, some of those challenges could be overcome.

“It is definitely a quality education system it is just knocking down those barriers to get to that education. I know that given some of their experiences of where they have come from, just being in a safe classroom is a recognized privilege and feeling relatively safe.” (School Board Representative)

For the most part, the majority of research participants felt that high school in Canada represented freedom, independence and opportunity to newcomer youth. Although some youth faced a number of barriers to achieving success in school, many agreed that they were inspired and motivated by what potential it had.

3) Specific School Supports

Research participants also identified a few specific supports available in high schools that contributed to the success of immigrant youth and enabled them to excel. During interviews and focus groups, an effort was made to understand how ESL classes affected the experiences of immigrant youth, to find out what was most helpful about ESL and how ESL could be more helpful. Some immigrant youth felt that ESL was a crucial aspect of their education, allowing them to learn English more quickly than they might have otherwise.

"I feel good that I'm an ESL student, because you get support from ESL classes and from regular [classes] right? And it's faster to learn English." (Immigrant Youth)

Youth also described how ESL offered them significant social support, where many students with similar experiences were together everyday in a classroom. These students became friends and allies, and were sometimes the only people in the school who understood and could empathize with each other's experiences. A number of youth felt that ESL classes made them feel like they were on equal footing with everyone else.

"ESL students, they were helping [me], because they know how I feel... especially [the ones] from my home country." (Immigrant Youth)

"The people [are] like you... They don't speak English, and then they have problems like you. So everyone is equal... the same. The same level that you are [at]." (Immigrant Youth)

Another school support that some research participants identified as contributing to the successful integration of immigrant youth in high school was extra curricular activities. Although not all youth felt comfortable joining teams, clubs, and other after-school activities, research participants identified that this was one way to meet new people, learn English and get more involved at school. A few parents spoke about the importance of their children's involvement in sports teams, such as track and field, stating that through sports their children were more likely to fit in, gain friends, and become part of the larger school system.

Some youth also felt that involvement in extracurricular activities like sports teams reflected their desire to meet new people and engage in something fun at the same time. One immigrant youth illustrated how involvement in sports provided him with opportunities to gain more Canadian-born friends.

“When I was in ESL, I didn’t know any Canadians. But, because I am very much involved in the school stuff... and that’s all Canadian, so that’s why I know some Canadian people.” (Immigrant Youth)

The majority of research participants identified that specific supports at school, like ESL and extra curricular activities helped newcomer youth both socially and academically. Participants also identified the need for increased school supports and greater access to these supports to allow them to adjust to the differences and challenges of high school more smoothly.

4) School-Community Partnerships

When research participants were asked to describe factors that contribute to a positive school environment for youth, a few people described specific services that combine school supports with community supports. Research participants identified the importance of these collaborative services in welcoming and orienting newcomer youth.

“[At our school] we have a very strong support system as they arrive here. We also have a teacher assistant who speaks several languages and who has been helping them out by giving them information when they first arrive. Most of them also go to the Welcoming Centre, which gives them a lot of information for their families about what to expect and things like that.” (ESL Teacher)

Another ESL teacher described the importance of the settlement workers, who provide invaluable support for newcomer youth. Settlement workers are employed through Kitchener-Waterloo YMCA Cross Cultural and Community Services, and have a partnership with both the Public and Catholic School Boards. They are placed within the five magnet schools in the region to provide support and assistance to newcomer youth, and to connect them to other services and supports that they may need. As settlement workers are sometimes the only available advocate for newcomer youth, some research participants stressed the need to extend their hours of availability in order to maximize this valued support.

“[Having settlement workers] is something that definitely helps us. Unfortunately this person is only at our school once a week. If she could be there more often, because she is definitely somebody who helps the whole family in general. [The settlement worker] makes all kinds of arrangements whether they haven’t enough money for uniforms or enough food to eat. She is the person that puts them in touch with the food bank or other agencies that can help them.” (ESL Teacher)

“Settlement workers can help them find a doctor, make a dental appointment, get hearing tested...” (ESL Teacher)

These partnerships have proven to be an incredible benefit to students and families, especially when youth first arrive in Canada, have no one to turn to, and have no

knowledge of or access to services that can help. Teachers and service providers alike agree that this partnership is necessary and beneficial to all those involved.

Community-Level Enabling Factors

In addition to individual and institutional-level protective factors, research participants also acknowledged the importance of community support in contributing to the success of immigrant youth in high school and leading to positive outcomes. The emphasis was on the responsibility of the entire community in thinking about, mobilizing for, and addressing the needs of immigrant youth.

1) Community Services and Supports

Research participants identified the importance of wider community supports in the success of newcomer youth in high school. Community services provided a number of valuable resources to newcomer families and their children, and specific resources for newcomer youth were identified as an important priority for the Waterloo Region community.

In addition to settlement workers who are placed in schools, the YMCA was identified as providing a number of other services and supports to newcomer youth and their families. One research participant identified the importance of supports from specific cultural groups, that provide youth with connections to their own culture and values. Especially for youth who may feel isolated in a new community and culture, this provided them with a greater sense of belonging, and a stronger connection to their family's values.

“If there’s a connection to the ethnic community... there’s a sense of belonging, there’s a sense of celebrating and sharing values that are important. So the whole community sort of exercises peer pressure on the children, so the expectation is of course you’re going to go to university.”
(Community Leader)

This same key informant also spoke about the importance of role models within specific ethnic communities which can serve as examples of success for youth to look up to, and can act as confidants and advocates for youth who need that support.

“Communities that have [good role models] are going to thrive. Those kids won’t get lost. And the trick is to find someone like that.” (Community Leader)

One research participant also described the importance of service providers who have similar cultural backgrounds as youth who can act as mentors. This participant explained the possible benefits of “having staff associated with youth programs who can explain [the program] to parents and youth”, in their first language, and who can “answer any questions” or concerns that parents or youth might have. Particularly for youth who felt disconnected from their culture and values, role models were seen to play an important role in building the comfort level and confidence of newcomer youth.

Below is a summary table of all enabling factors as found in this research study.

Summary of Factors Enabling Positive High School Outcomes

<i>Level</i>	<i>Enabling Factor</i>
Individual and Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self Motivation• Family Support• Peer Support and Friendships
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Supportive Teachers and Principals• Consistent, Quality Education• Specific School Supports• School-Community Partnerships
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community Services and Supports

What Hinders Positive High School Outcomes

Another important area of this research study was to understand what hinders immigrant youth to have positive academic and social outcomes in high school. This section summarizes the opinions of research participants, privileging the voice of immigrant youth. There are three main categories: individual and family level, institutional level, and socio-political level. Although presented as individual factors, quite often research participants reported that a combination of factors led to negative outcomes for youth in high school.

Individual and Family-Level Hindering Factors

This section of the report illustrates how a number of individual-level factors could negatively impact the success of immigrant youth in school, and prevent positive outcomes. The factors below describe how interactions and circumstances involving peers, parents and other family members can negatively affect the high school outcomes of immigrant youth, beginning with the more common hindering factors identified during interviews and focus groups.

1) Difficulties “Fitting in” to High School Culture

A large number of youth, parents and other research participants spoke about the difficulties of “fitting in” to high school culture as one of the primary hindering factors affecting newcomer youth. A number of research participants talked about the incredible social challenges that immigrant youth are confronted with as they enter high school in Canada. Research participants also talked about how and why high school was so important as a positive social experience. For some youth, school was the only real outlet of self-expression and freedom. However, when youth do not “fit in” to this social environment, it can be particularly damaging and devastating.

“Youth in general, especially in the older grades, we party a lot and if you can fit in, that’s a lot of fun to do. High school is half school and half the social aspect in my opinion and you can have a heck of a lot of fun in both those areas if you can find what you like.” (Student Leader)

High school is generally considered a time of intense pressure for youth, when peer groups solidify, when particular fads are adopted, and where figures of speech and music are important elements that contribute to youth culture and determine social status. For newcomers who have arrived at school with no social connections, who wear clothes that are not representative of the current trends, who eat different foods and speak different languages, and who are not aware of the current symbols of youth culture, they may have an incredibly difficult time fitting in and finding peers with whom they can identify. As some research participants illustrate, other peers can be incredibly unforgiving of these differences.

“Everybody has friends and nobody needs new friends, do you know what I mean? That is from my perspective as a senior, friends have been established and I have seen new people come in and just kind of get forgotten...Roles are defined quick[ly].” (Student Leader)

“It was very scary for my kids and they had to talk about it. They were finding it different, they were finding it very hard to get to know people. Although they were familiar with the language and culture, they had to work hard to be accepted within that school community and among the students.” (Immigrant Parent)

One key informant also pointed out that high school is a time when youth are particularly sensitive about themselves. In high school, youth are often more self-conscious about their appearance, and are making decisions about who they want to be as adults based on their own values and beliefs, as well as the judgments and opinions of their peers. High school is a time of personal change and growth, when the majority of youth struggle with their identity. One youth explained his feeling that as someone new to Canada and to the culture, he is “no one here.” As one parent illustrated, when sensitivities about identity are compounded with language barriers and other issues, the social experience for newcomer youth can be extremely difficult.

“Understanding the language is very important and you know how teenagers are at this age – they become very proud, and when they don’t understand, I think their sense of pride somehow gets hurt or attacked. They become very sensitive at this age.” (Immigrant Parent)

Other youth felt cut off from the general high school population by the visual things that separated them, such as physical appearance, dress, and even food. This situation is compounded when Canadian-born youth are not interested in understanding these youth, or in reaching out and welcoming them to the school. As a result, some youth interviewed in the research study felt rejected by Canadian born youth, resulting in a feeling of marginalization.

“I think what new immigrants face on a daily basis is, I don’t want to say a coldness, but I would say that there is an environment there that does not understand them. I think that you have a lot of new immigrant students walking around feeling that nobody understands them.” (School Board Representative)

“People see them as poor and marginalized since they cannot participate in activities, and might ignore and isolate them further.” (School Board Representative)

One student leader also spoke about the formation of cliques and the negative effect that has on a student who does not “fit in” to a particular group. Some research participants spoke about the unforgiving nature of these social groups and the potential damage they can have. Newcomer youth who find fellow students from their own cultural or linguistic group are also in danger, because their association with the group may further prevent them from “fitting in” to the “mainstream” and could inhibit their ability to learn English.

“So quickly in high school it becomes cliquey. Groups form and if you have a tough time adjusting you can get left behind and I don’t want to paint it as a bleak picture but I think pretty quickly you can get isolated.” (Student Leader)

This same research participant spoke about how this problem can also occur when newcomer youth choose to make friends only with other youth of the same cultural background. This participant explained how this can also isolate newcomer youth and prevent relationships from forming between immigrants and non-immigrants.

Several youth also spoke about the isolation and rejection they felt when they were not accepted by other immigrants from their home country who had lived in Canada for a longer period of time. For some, this rejection was a much greater offense than being rejected from Canadian-born youth. One youth observed that this occurred when youth “want to pretend they are Canadian”, and therefore, association with more recent newcomers prevented them from achieving this goal.

“Most people from my country came 17 years ago – they turn their back on you. They let me down.” (Immigrant Youth)

“I fought with my friend because [of my] English... he was from Afghanistan, but he made fun of me in English and I didn’t even understand what he said.” (Immigrant Youth)

A number of youth who participated in the research also talked generally about feelings of loneliness, loss and social isolation, especially after they first arrived. What was particularly difficult for these youth was their separation from family and friends who remained in their home country. Some youth said that they felt “really alone” and “really sad” and others even said that they felt “depressed” because of their current situation and because they missed their friends and family who were not with them in Canada. Some youth also felt ignored or “useless” and some felt that although they received positive attention from other students when they first arrived, the novelty of having a new student in the class wore off and they were left without any meaningful friendships.

“I miss family... my dad and my grandpa are still in Cuba... I miss them a lot. Sometimes I feel it would have been better if I never would have come to Canada... I miss them too much. I grew up with my dad, we were hanging out together and going everywhere together.” (Immigrant Youth)

“I used to sit in the [cafeteria] and I used to cry for at least an entire hour... I would see people sitting there, and I would see people and their groups and stuff, and it would remind myself that I wasn’t with my friends.” (Immigrant Youth)

As the comments above illustrate, the social aspect of school is very important to the high school experience. When the specific factors that allow for successful high school socialization are limited, this can be incredibly damaging and isolating.

2) Trauma and Stress of Escaping from War/Violence

From the perspective of research participants, the stress, instability and trauma that some families bring with them to Canada can be burdens on the whole family. These issues also create obstacles for youth in succeeding in high school, and require focused, intentional support to address. Even though parents may want to get more involved, they are simply not ready, available or able to do so.

“The climate now is so different with the youth. There are many more youth coming from many more countries and the countries quite often are war-torn. Countries in which there is some kind of political instability...[Sometimes] the family is intact, but there is still a struggle. Having a background that is not as smooth as what it seems here, quite often these students come and they don’t realize that some of the students, the friends they meet, are suffering.”
(Community Leader)

One research participant emphasized that even though there are more and more newcomer youth in Waterloo Region who have experienced trauma and violence in their home countries, neither the school system, nor the teachers or students have been adequately prepared to deal with the issues that youth bring with them when they arrive.

For youth who have experienced violence and war in their countries or in their families, research participants illustrated that these youth may come into the schools with a great need for supports that are not available in an ESL classroom. The expectation in high school is that they will continue with their schooling and graduate. However, these youth may not be equipped to do this, or have access to the appropriate resources that could help.

“If they are from a refugee family, if back in their countries they have crime and all those political issues and if they have witnessed their family members being killed in front of them. If they have lived in camps for a long period of time where they didn’t learn anything or if they did, it was very limited, then if they come here, and suddenly they are sent to high school with all the expectations of high school, then for sure it will be very difficult for them to continue.” (Immigrant Parent)

For some youth, the stress they felt from witnessing their parents’ struggles caused them more difficulty in fitting in or doing well in school. With all the other pressures and issues some youth are confronted with in their family, they simply did not see school as a priority.

“The biggest thing is seeing your parents...seeing my dad so frustrated...If there’s something that really hurts me, it is seeing my dad like that, seeing him struggle so much... I don’t want to see my dad like that... You need your dad to be strong here, he’s like your hero, you know...so the person you’re looking up to, just falls down...That really just gets you.” (Immigrant Youth)

A few newcomer youth spoke about escaping a serious conflict, violence, and/or persecution in their home country, indicating that some families arrived under highly stressful terms. As such, the transition to Canada can be incredibly difficult, and parents may be consumed with finding ways to meet the immediate needs of their family, combined with coping with trauma. For some families, following their children's academic success may be a luxury that is simply not realistic for them. Some families are pre-occupied with finding stable employment, and distracted from how they would usually be involved in their children's lives. This can also cause parents to feel a loss of connection to their children and a loss of control as a parent.

“Everybody is just stressed out in the family. You want to achieve so much in a very short period of time, but it's a very difficult time for families. For a little while I would say that I myself developed a gap in the closeness of my children and me and it took a long time once I noticed that to go back to the same level of closeness with them.” (Immigrant Parent)

“Immigrant parents are so busy and some of them are trying to maintain the status that they had before. Some of them are trying to make it in a new country and they want the best for their kids and themselves. Parents find also that they don't have the control over their kids that they used to.” (Community Leader)

“I think the parents are reeling from the adjustments they must make. They are grieving. They don't understand the school system and they are intimidated about their English. It doesn't matter when we offer appointment times; chances are they're working.” (ESL Teacher)

As this last comment illustrates, the numerous stresses faced by immigrant families can make it difficult for them to participate in their children's education. Immigrant parents, youth, teachers and other key informants described that, even for parents who would like to get involved, circumstances may prevent it.

3) Unemployment and Underemployment of Parents of Immigrant Youth

For the large majority of the youth and parents interviewed during this research project, challenges related to gainful employment were a reality for families, especially in the first few years of immigration, and negatively affected parents as well as the youth who witnessed their parents' struggle.

As interviews and focus groups reveal, newcomer youth may be confronted with the difficulties of their parents in finding work and in financially supporting their family. This causes additional stress to youth, and in some cases may cause them to leave school early to take on more financial responsibility. Whether youth witness their parents' stress, or if they are actually required to work themselves, the difficulty of parents struggling with stable employment has a negative impact on the social, emotional and academic well-being of youth. For example, youth described feeling confused and frustrated by

their parents' inability to find gainful employment in Canada, and spoke passionately of their parents' struggles to have their credentials recognized in Canada.

"[My dad] used to be his own boss, but here, he is working right now on a line in a factory and sometimes he really gets depressed... I always try to explain to him that we will be fine after a while, but not soon." (Immigrant Youth)

"If Canada is opening doors, if Canada is going to say, 'yes, we need more immigrants,' [then] why do they have to be doing jobs that they don't want to do? Why do you see only Asian people owning restaurants, and why do you see only Hispanics cleaning the toilet? My dad is a professional, and he is nothing here." (Immigrant Youth)

In some cases, research participants described that newcomer youth were required to take part-time jobs, and if necessary, quit school and work full time to support the family.

"Some [youth] do plan to leave and in most cases [there are] financial circumstances. They say that they have certain needs, the family has certain needs, there are too many children in the family and they are not aware of the kind of help they could get from social services. They are even looking ahead and it is not possible for them to make it to college or university in many cases because they don't think they will be able to afford that." (ESL Teacher)

"My goal is to graduate high school and go to university, but my dad is almost retired and my mom, she doesn't work. If I had to leave university to help my family, I would definitely do so. I cannot just leave them. My responsibility to my family is the most important thing to me, after than comes education." (Immigrant Youth)

The challenge of completing high school successfully may be too great, in the face of other economic needs and responsibilities. For youth who choose to leave school in order to ease some of the financial strain, the work available to them was often inconsistent and underpaid. Although research participants indicated that the primary purpose of youth in seeking employment was to contribute to the family income, other expenses, such as bus passes, athletics fees and personal purchases, were also motivating factors.

"[Immigrant youth] are either expected to work or to go home [after school] and look after siblings. Most of the parents and families are trying to work very hard, maybe trying to hold two jobs. They never see the parents. These students, struggling as they are in school, have this extra responsibility...they are also exhausted from walking the distance because a bus pass is too expensive." (ESL Teacher)

4) Parent-Child Role Reversal

Youth participating in interviews and focus groups talked about the confusion and stress they felt when they experienced "role reversal" with their parents after arriving in

Canada. A number of research participants spoke about how the role of parents and dynamics between parents and children seemed to change from what they had been.

Research participants described how youth may adapt to Canadian society and culture faster than their parents. Youth also tend to learn English faster than their parents, requiring them to play a greater support role to parents, such as helping them maneuver the system or acting as their translators. Research participants described how this can result in parents and children experiencing a shift in roles or power when parents are more dependent on their children. Research participants illustrated how this can be frustrating for both parents and children, and disappointing when parents are unable to provide the same support to their children as before.

“If the support structure at home is not there, the experience at school is overwhelming... these students are often unsuccessful, and are taking courses for the third, even fourth, time.” (ESL Teacher)

In some families, youth may end up providing greater support to their parents than the parents can to them. Especially when parents have difficulty speaking English, they may need their children’s assistance just to get through daily activities. This can be demeaning for parents, and difficult for youth who have to sacrifice their own needs and desires in order to help their parents.

“Now, kids are translators, kids are going to the bank... kids are going to the doctor for the mom...kids are helping parents to solve some problems... the system has changed.” (Immigrant Parent)

“Children take and catch everything faster than parents... relationships change... parents become dependent on children... sometimes children can earn more than parents.” (Immigrant Parent)

“My parents couldn’t speak English, so I was the only one to translate for them... sometimes I have to skip school because they have an appointment and I have to translate for them. I always have to make time to go with them.” (Immigrant Youth)

This illustrates the pressure that some immigrant youth have to endure during their years in high school, which forces them into a parenting role much earlier in life. While parents struggle to navigate their way through Canadian systems and structures, they may also struggle to provide academic assistance to their children. As a result, this can be a contributing factor preventing youth from academic success.

5) Home-School Culture Conflict

Another home-related factor identified that gets in the way of full success for immigrant youth at school was the clash between the culture at school and the culture of their family. Often, youth adapt to a new culture more quickly than their parents and are torn between two different cultural beliefs and practices. Parents fear the loss of those values and traditions within their children.

“The other thing I can see is there can be conflicts between the culture at home and at school. The first time I went to high school with my daughters it was a big cultural shock. We saw how boys and girls interact with each other [here]. It was pretty shocking for us.” (Immigrant Parent)

“I cannot go to the school dances or to places where people drink...I want to go...[but] I can't... my parents and my religion say no.” (Immigrant Youth)

One immigrant parent spoke about the difference in values related to education between her home country and Canada, which she worried would not prepare her child as well academically as at home.

“[There are] different values in my country... [there,] it is a shame to drop out of school and you can get hardly any job, but here they can get a job at 16, 17, 18 [years of age], and they can live on their own... it's a big change.” (Immigrant Parent)

Research participants described the considerable pressure that youth may feel in trying to find their way with new friends and within a new school, while at the same time trying to follow the parameters, values and beliefs of the culture they grew up with. This can be particularly difficult for youth who want to fit in, but do not necessarily agree with what they see, how their peers act, and what is considered “normal”. As a result, youth are in constant negotiation between the Canadian norms that they witness everyday in school, and what is expected of them based on how they were raised.

“When you are from a different background, and you have a different culture, you see the world in different ways... we are taught to respect people, to be nice, don't do anything to harm others, or make fun of others.” (Immigrant Youth)

“So many cultures think people are equal, but we respect ladies more. We respect ladies a lot. [My older sisters] are working, but I don't want them to work hard.” (Immigrant Youth)

Youth also find themselves divided by the culture they live in and the cultural beliefs of their families. For some youth, there is no resolution to this conflict. As teenagers, they are already experiencing the process of finding out who they are, what their values are, and who they want to be as adults. The search for identity adds more pressure, and can make youth feel that they have to make definitive choices about their values and beliefs.

Research participants described how a number of youth begin to hide things from their parents, and essentially lead “double” lives in order to make their own choices without upsetting their parents.

“These teenagers are really living two lives – a different life at home and a different life at school. If they try to bring the stuff from school to home it is not easy. Especially at the beginning, people are very, very protective. [Parents] really don’t like change at that time. Most of them are not ready to accept any change because they are fearful about the future and have fears about maybe losing their family ties. I think teenagers face the most challenging experience that any newcomer can go through.” (Immigrant Parent)

Even though youth may feel divided by two distinct cultural practices and beliefs, they are also very understanding of their parents’ position. During interviews and focus groups, youth seemed very accepting of their parents’ resistance to change. At the same time, youth research participants described themselves as more flexible in their values and beliefs than their parents, and for some, saw this as a survival mechanism.

“I think [parents] cannot change, because this is the way they were raised... my mom, she’s so strict and my dad tells her that now we are in a different country, now we have to change, but she says no and we just accept it.” (Immigrant Youth)

The comments above illustrate the tremendous pressure put on newcomer youth, both from Canadian culture (other youth, teachers, etc) and from their families. Although some youth are able to find a balance between these two worlds, this is an added pressure that can contribute to the overall stress they experience while trying to fit in and succeed in high school.

Institutional-Level Hindering Factors

Immigrant youth face a number of challenges when they arrive at school. This section of the report illustrates how qualities related to the school staff, structures and environment can negatively impact youth and get in the way of their positives outcomes in high school.

1) Unwelcoming School Culture and Climate

When immigrant youth arrive in Canada, many are faced with a school environment that does not understand their circumstances, and does not provide adequate structures for welcoming them. Research participants emphasized that improving school climate is a responsibility for the whole school – starting with school principals and continuing with teachers and other students. Research participants also described the need to acknowledge and respond to the fact that “our student populations are changing”.

During interviews and focus groups, immigrant youth and a few other research participants acknowledged that although some teachers and principals were patient and understanding of newcomer youth, others were not.

“I think some teachers give up and some teachers work hard, really hard and so there is a gap there. So the students that are fortunate enough to have the teachers that have had the training and have used the trainings successfully, those students with those kind of teachers make it. The other students flounder.” (Community Leader)

“Sometimes teachers aren’t understanding of your situation [as an immigrant].” (Immigrant Youth)

A number of youth research participants described experiencing indifference from their teachers, while others described teachers losing patience quickly when they failed to comprehend something.

“Sometimes, I tell a teacher that I am ESL and I need more time, but some of the teachers say ‘that’s your problem’.” (Immigrant Youth)

“When you come here, some of the teachers, they just don’t like you or they don’t want to understand you... because you’re new, and you can’t speak English... they hate you because you can’t speak their language.” (Immigrant Youth)

Research participants also talked about the lack of support that newcomer youth receive from high school guidance counselors, and a number of the youth involved in this research project stated that they had never gone to see a guidance counsellor for help. Some felt that guidance counselors were either “too busy”, or that they were not understanding of their needs and situations. Some youth also felt that guidance counsellors were impatient with them and failed to accurately assess the student's context when giving them advice.

“It’s okay if you go one time to your guidance [counselor], but then when you ask for help another time, and then another, they just get mad, I don’t know... and then you don’t want to go anymore.” (Immigrant Youth)

“[The guidance counsellor] didn’t help... they put me in ESL and that was it, but I didn’t even understand... I hadn’t learned English in my country.” (Immigrant Youth)

Some research participants spoke about the need for students and teachers to be “more understanding”, and said that there should be continuous dialogue, training and education within the schools to ensure this happens. One research participant illustrated this need for education by providing an example about how one teacher’s ignorance had a significant negative impact on a student. In this particular case, the teacher caused the

student considerable discomfort within the classroom, without an awareness of how it would impact the student.

“There was one student who said he didn’t want to go to a certain class... because [the teacher] wouldn’t call the student by his name. [The teacher] called him something else because he said his name was too hard. I confronted the teacher in a sort of friendly way. I said, ‘what do you do with students whose name you find difficult?’. He said ‘oh I just give them a name’. I said, ‘you know some students don’t like that’... We talked about students coming in and how they feel and he got really serious. He said that he really didn’t realize what he was doing to this particular student. Some people just need to realize and need to be helped in how to deal with difference.” (Community Leader)

Another problematic aspect of school culture identified by a few research participants had to do with the lack of ethno-cultural representation among school staff. For youth who are new to Canada, a teacher who shares something with them may be an important factor contributing to that student’s confidence and ability to succeed in school.

“We don’t have principals or vice principals that are culturally representative. [Immigrant youth] don’t see themselves in our team, in our teachers, in our administrators.” (School Board Representative)

Research participants illustrate that resources are not focused enough for meaningful change to occur. A few research participants describe that schools seem to make the minimum effort required to address the needs of immigrant youth, but that supports and services that could make a real difference are a last minute, as-needed priority. For example, current ESL classes were described as not necessarily tailored to the specific academic level of the students. As a result, youth may leave those classes without adequate training in English.

“This semester we have a brand new beginner level A [that is combined] with a level B which is a lower to intermediate. Some of those kids can pretty much handle the present work, and then there are students who know nothing. It is so hard to teach that class if you focus on your beginners or the intermediate students or they cause trouble and there are behavioral issues. And if you do vice versa then the beginners are left out.” (ESL Teacher)

“I don’t want to discount the connection with the teacher because a teacher can make the difference in a child’s life. But there’s the language barrier and the lack of support around English as a second language. If you are not addressing language as a core issue and then literacy and then numeracy, then you are not meeting the needs of the students. I don’t know how you can expect that child to acclimatize, to become more and to embrace their new cultural experience when we in turn are not honouring their cultural experience.” (School Board Representative)

An unwelcoming school culture was stressed as a considerable impediment to school success by students, teachers, community leaders and school board representatives. The net result was that immigrant youth were not progressing academically or socially as much as they could be.

2) Inadequate Resources and Supports in Schools

A number of research participants pointed out that the resources available for services and supports are insufficient to meet the need within the current high school system.

“We have students arriving throughout the school year... We definitely feel the need for some support,[which] could be from the community or right at the schools too as soon as they arrive to give them all of this information. It takes so long for them to [adjust] and everybody is so busy. The principals are busy with so much administrative stuff and guidance counselors are overwhelmed with the students they have under their care. Teachers are very busy teaching our curriculum and then these students get lost and overwhelmed because there is so much to learn and to do.” (ESL Teacher)

“Money is attached to these kids, but it doesn’t all get down into the classroom, we don’t know where it goes.” (ESL Teacher)

Research participants also identified a lack of support and resources specifically with regards to ESL. Not only are teachers forced to juggle a number of different levels within the same classroom, there is also a general disregard for all of the issues that accompany students in ESL classes. Similarly to the general distribution of resources for newcomer youth throughout the school, research participants explained that in some schools, resources for ESL are only allotted after youth arrive, causing a crisis every time there is an influx of newcomer students.

The perceived usefulness of ESL differed considerably across research participants. The majority of youth saw ESL classes as helpful and something that had personally assisted them in their high school experience. The classes offered significant social and academic support, whether it was from other ESL students or from the teachers, and some youth regarded ESL class as a "safe haven" where students felt comfortable with themselves and with their peers. Clearly, ESL provides an assortment of supports to immigrant youth that goes far beyond simply learning English. However, several research participants called into question the manner in which ESL classes are currently administered and the extent to which ESL is able to effectively address students’ needs – whether they be linguistic or otherwise. It is especially troubling to hear of students being pushed out of ESL when they are not ready to leave.

“They made me get out [of ESL and] I wasn't ready for it. Because I didn't know much English still...If I don't understand, what's the point.” (Immigrant Youth)

Other youth questioned the benefits of ESL and felt that ESL classes were not truly academic, but rather, more of a place to have "fun". Some youth said that ESL was "too easy", and offered too many opportunities to socialize with other students in their own language instead of English. In one case, this was directly attributed to the ESL teacher:

"In my ESL class, I never speak English. Just sometimes...[because] my teacher, she lived in Cuba, so we speak a... lot of Spanish." (Immigrant Youth)

Several youth spoke about their frustration with being placed in a level of ESL lower than what their abilities called for.

"Some people don't like ESL because it's really easy for them." (Immigrant Youth)

"Sometimes we think we're ok in regular classes and they say no, you take ESL." (Immigrant Youth)

Some youth spoke about the stigma attached to being an ESL student, and did not want to be connected to ESL for fear of how other youth will see them and treat them. For some youth, the experience of being an ESL student could be socially isolating, as it often segregates ESL students from the rest of school. During interviews and focus groups, a few youth identified feeling embarrassed and self-conscious about attending ESL.

"When you have white people as friends... they're like 'oh you're in ESL?', they laugh at us. They think it's for retarded people or something like that." (Immigrant Youth)

"ESL isolates you from everything." (Immigrant Youth)

The comments above illustrate that, although schools have established some programs and supports for newcomer students, these supports are generally experienced as superficial and not substantial or tailored enough to meet the level of need that exists.

3) Difficulties with the Canadian School System and Meeting Academic Requirements
Another issue raised during interviews and focus groups was the difficulty newcomer youth face in trying to understand and decipher the school system in Canada. A number of youth described a lack of understanding and support in helping them orient to the Canadian system. This is especially true for immigrants who arrive as older adolescents or as refugees, having spent much of their life in a different school system, or having had a fragmented school experience.

Many students found it difficult to understand the way in which the system of education in high school is organized, how the grades are structured, and what teaching methods are employed. This caused youth stress and made more difficult for them to adapt to and succeed in this new system. Many youth voiced their frustrations with the process of having to transition from a school system they were comfortable with in their home

country to the one in Waterloo Region.

"This system is different. Here you can be in grade 12 and take [a] class from grade 10? In my country you cannot do that. For example, [if] you're in grade 10, you have to pass all the classes in grade 10 to pass grade 11." (Immigrant Youth)

Some youth described feeling annoyed with their inability to use the mathematical methods taught to them and used in their country, and had difficulty adopting new methods that were different, harder to understand and less effective in solving calculations:

"It's not the same...They'll tell you to do it one way and then back in your country they'll tell you to do another way, right? And even if it's easier, how they tell you [to do it] in your country...[here] they say 'no, you can't do it that way', even though you know how to do it and it's still the same thing." (Immigrant Youth)

Parents also identified the challenges they faced in adjusting to and understanding the education system in Waterloo Region and often felt an inability to help their children with homework. The differences in education systems, combined with a lack of information to inform parents about those differences, made parents feel that they “don’t understand the education system”, causing some parents to feel unable to help their children succeed.

"As for the system of education, it was hard for me to catch... in my country I knew what my kid was doing in school." (Immigrant Parent)

"My child [was] going to school every day without any homework... she (was) like a package going to home and school back and forth... I couldn't help her." (Immigrant Parent)

While other high school youth have the advantage of going to their parents for extra help, many immigrant youth and immigrant parents felt that this was not possible for them, and that the cultural divide between school systems was too great.

"When we want to help our children and explain... I tried only one time to explain to my oldest ones some math problems... when I tried to explain to her, she started to cry because she doesn't know my explanation." (Immigrant Parent)

"[My parents] learned in a different place, but when I ask them for help [with school work] it doesn't make sense...when I ask my dad for help, he explains to me how to answer a question, but when I translate it to English, I confuse it... Every country has different subjects that they teach, and different ways that they teach, so it doesn't really help when I ask them here." (Immigrant Youth)

Based on discussions with research participants, succeeding in high school seems to be much more difficult for immigrant youth than for most Canadian-born youth. When youth participating in the study described their daily schedule, it involved spending numerous hours on homework and studying, and few hours of sleeping. Many youth identified feeling overwhelmed or behind in their classes, and talked about the extra time and effort required just to get through their homework.

“Understanding what I have to do in school is difficult. When I have to read a story, for Canadians they only have to read the story once, but I have to read it over and over to get what it’s talking about. I have to spend more times than them to do the homework.” (Immigrant Youth)

Research participants also talked about the difficulty newcomer youth face when they struggle in school and get further and further behind. If they fail credits, and are required to repeat classes, change ESL levels or attend summer school, this can be so discouraging and embarrassing that they give up and leave school altogether.

“Socially, to drop down to a lower grade can, it is not that bad to be honest but I think some people are embarrassed by it and this system is set up in such a way if you failed grade 10 math, it simply becomes impossible to get up there and take your grade 11 and 12’s. The pathways to get up into the higher levels are very limited in that you have to do well, early on. If you don’t, you’re not motivated, then that’s it.” (Student Leader)

“I have friends who used to be in my class, but after a while, they just disappeared... they say ‘what’s the point? I couldn’t get good marks’”.
(Immigrant Youth)

As this section illustrates, immigrant youth face a number of stresses and challenges in fitting in and succeeding in the Canadian school system. Much time and energy of both youth and parents is spent attempting to navigate a new system, and as the comments above illustrate, this experience can be overwhelming and defeating. Although supportive teachers, counselors and principals were identified at different points during focus groups and interviews, few research participants spoke about how school structures were effective in helping newcomer youth integrate into this new system.

Socio-Political Hindering Factors

In addition to difficulties faced at home and in school, research participants talked about issues related to the social and/or political context or environment in which they lived in their home countries, while others spoke about how the social and/or political context in Canada affected youth and their experiences in Waterloo Region high schools.

1) Gaps in Education and Lack of English Fluency

Another reason identified as to why newcomer youth may have difficulty adapting to and succeeding in the Canadian school system has to do with the level of education they bring with them.

“[Their experience] all depends on where they are coming from and how much English they have previously studied before they arrive to Canada, and also the circumstances that brought them here.” (ESL Teacher)

“I have about 5 or 6 Afghani girls who, for a certain time, did not receive education. They are having a good time, they are enjoying school, but their learning is suffering because of that gap. We wonder about them and what we can do for them because they are getting older and Ontario says after 21 they can't stay in high school and so I wonder how many are going to go to adult education. So I think those girls are, I don't know, they are not hopeless but it is going to take a lot to help them bridge the gap.” (ESL Teacher)

Some research participants described how the “education gap” was a huge factor separating Canadian born and newcomer students. Research participants illustrated how this could happen for youth who lived in war-torn countries where they were unable to attend school, where they had been in and out of school, or had spent time in refugee camps. Upon arriving in Canada, some youth have more difficulty than others in bridging the education gap, and some have little support to help them. ESL teachers reported seeing many more newcomer students than in previous years who are refugees and have high needs. Teachers described these students as “ELD” or “Essential Level” students, who, *“more and more, [are] totally illiterate in their own language, with no schooling.”*

“We used to have mainly immigrant students, and a few ELD students, and now it is totally the opposite... now, I probably would have 13 ELD students and maybe 2 immigrant students [in one class]” (ESL Teacher)

Youth who were interviewed for this research project who were early school leavers felt that their difficulty learning English played a major role in their choice to leave school, and thought that this was true for other early school leavers as well. A number of youth and other research participants felt that there was simply not enough time to learn English in school, were disappointed with the lack of English grammar content and felt that ESL was not focused or intense enough to learn English. They also felt that in spite of this, many youth are expected to perform at a level that is not realistic for them.

“I go to class, and I sleep because I don't know what the teacher is saying.” (Immigrant Youth)

“Can you imagine going to another country and they expect you to write an essay... at the grade 11 level... it's ludicrous!” (ESL teacher)

“Always, his teacher's complaining [that] he cannot even write, he cannot even do this. And it's making him angry because they are saying, 'maybe he is stupid'.” (Immigrant Parent)

A few youth were also concerned that their limitations in English diminished their choices for post-secondary education and employment. Even though they have ambitions for their futures, these youth felt that because of their lack of English fluency, they may never be able to attend college university.

"That's why I stopped in Grade 12, because of my English. I'm supposed to be in college right now, or university. [But] my English is not too good for that, so they told me to stay back." (Immigrant Youth)

"Friends are easy to find. The thing is the English, you know, to pass grades... My friends back in [the] Dominican, they're all in university. And when they ask you, like, 'what are you studying?', it's hard to say I'm in Grade 12." (Immigrant Youth)

Clearly, lack of English fluency and consistent education throughout their lives makes it very difficult for newcomer youth to integrate into the Canadian school system and to achieve success. Within the current system, there are few supports to help youth with more significant educational and English needs. These youth often get pushed out of the school system, where there are even fewer supports and less chance for them to get the consistent education that they need.

2) Teasing and Bullying

Another issue that came up during interviews and focus groups was the problem of being teased and bullied by other students at school. Some youth felt targeted as an immigrant, because of their particular cultural background, or because of differences related to their language and English fluency. Some research participants also described how newcomer youth may be targeted by youth who have a negative influence on them, as a result of their vulnerability and willingness to follow along in order to develop friends. Other research participants spoke about immigrant youth being subject to emotional and physical abuse. As some of the people interviewed for this research project described, the inability or difficulty to understand English often exacerbated the situation, and a few research participants described situations that led to physical confrontations.

"In my gym class, I couldn't speak English. When two of them were speaking to each other and laughing, I felt that they were laughing at me...they were making fun of me." (Immigrant Youth)

"You get pretty mad... you think they're talking about you. You get into fights a lot." (Immigrant Youth)

Some youth also described the frustration of being made fun of, and having to make friends in spite of the fact that they did not feel wanted or appreciated by other students. One youth described how, in spite of this, he knew that making friends and fitting in was important to his survival at school.

“Because you’re alone, and you don’t have friends, they try to make fun of you... you kind of live by yourself... but, you have to go and make friend, go and ask their names... you always have to be with the people, even if they ignore you.” (Immigrant Youth)

This may contribute to another issue that research participants discussed as occurring when newcomer youth have difficulty making friends. When youth have difficulty finding friends who value education and doing well in school, some youth may choose a social group that influences them more negatively than positively. This can happen for a variety of reasons.

One research participant spoke about how the lack of positive role models could cause discouragement among newcomer youth. This research participant felt that if there are no positive role models that youth can identify with, they may get discouraged, feel less confident in themselves, and even begin to associate with people who are not good for them. This can also happen when there are “not a lot of examples of people [like them] who have succeeded by staying in school”.

A few research participants also expressed the concern that newcomer youth are more vulnerable to being targeted by peer groups that have a negative influence, such as gangs. Youth who are already isolated, who may be more in need of social connection, and who may be unaware of the potential damage that their association with certain groups could cause them could be at greatest risk.

“Most of the people that drop out are like the gangsters. They are in grade 9 and then years pass and some... can just get sucked in by that whole culture. [They] skip class...and I think sometimes for immigrants it’s easier to fit in with that culture than to fit in with the ‘let’s get involved and stay at school until 5’ kind of crowd.” (Student Leader)

“Some [youth] get into peer pressure, which can be quite damaging. Some of them get into groups with peers [who] are struggling. What happens is that some of them bully these new people. And if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em sort of thing.” (Community Leader)

These comments reiterate the importance of positive social connections and interactions at school. With the absence of positive, productive social interaction, immigrant youth may be particularly vulnerable to other, more negative influences. A summary of all factors hindering positive high school outcomes for immigrant youth is found in the table below.

Summary of Factors Hindering Positive High School Outcomes

<i>Level</i>	<i>Hindering Factor</i>
Individual and Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties “Fitting in” to High School Culture • Trauma and Stress of Escaping from War/Violence • Unemployment and Underemployment of Parents of Immigrant Youth • Parent-Child Role Reversal • Home-School Culture Conflict
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unwelcoming School Culture and Climate • Inadequate Resources and Supports in Schools • Difficulties with the Canadian School System and Meeting Academic Requirements
Socio-Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaps in Education and Lack of English Fluency • Teasing and Bullying

Suggested Pathways to Success

Research participants were asked to give suggestions or recommendations that would lead to increased success for immigrant youth in high school. This section of the report summarizes the opinions of what should be done to maximize the success of immigrant youth. The suggestions are organized by stakeholder group: youth, parents and family, schools, school boards, the provincial education system and the community. They are written in the form of advice that research participants offer to each of these groups.

Pathways to Success: What Youth Can Do

A number of research participants identified ways in which immigrant youth in high school could improve their own success or ways that all youth can contribute to the success of newcomer youth in high school.

1) Be patient, persevere and don't be afraid to ask for help. Although the process may take time and courage, newcomer youth should develop goals and outreach to others to get the support they need to reach those goals. Asking for help both inside and outside of school will also be useful.

- 2) *Make friends strategically.* Newcomer youth should align themselves with other youth who share similar values and goals. This can help maintain focus and provide motivation when faced with challenges.
- 3) *Get involved.* Immigrant youth should try and find out what extra curricular activities are available and get involved as much as they can. This can help in meeting new people and getting acquainted to Canadian and other cultures.
- 4) *Believe in yourself.* Although immigrant youth will be faced with challenges, they should try to believe in themselves, in their own skills and abilities, and in succeeding at school.
- 5) *Talk to your parents.* Even though families are often under stress, immigrant youth should try to keep their connection to their parents. Immigrant youth should talk to their parents about school and ask them for help when they need it.
- 6) *Be friendly and open-minded towards newcomer youth (for Canadian-born youth).* Canadian born youth should approach newcomer youth when they arrive, welcome them at school, involve them as much as possible, and be empathetic about their experiences.

Pathways to Success: What Parents Can Do

Suggestions related to parents primarily dealt with how and why parents should get more involved with their children as they get acquainted with the Canadian school system. Although the level and intensity of involvement will differ from parent to parent and from family to family, a number of different research participants identified the positive impact of parents' involvement on youth.

- 1) *Get involved any way you can.* Whenever possible, immigrant parents should go to parent-teacher interviews, talk to guidance counselors, join the parent council, or volunteer in the school. Settlement workers or other community service providers may be helpful in supporting parents with this involvement. Interview and focus group participants also emphasized the importance of newcomer parents taking steps to inform themselves about their children's education.
- 2) *Talk to your children and encourage them in school.* Parents should find time to ask children about school and how they're doing. Although parents may not be able to get directly involved in their children's homework, they can provide support to them and pass on the value of education. They can also find alternative ways of supporting their children, through teachers and other supports.
- 3) *Be understanding of the changes your children are going through.* Research study participants spoke about the difficulty that a number of parents faced in accepting the changes in their children as a result of living in a new country and culture. Parents should try and be understanding of these changes and inquire about them with their children throughout this process.

Pathways to Success: What Individual Schools Can Do

Research participants identified a number of ways that schools can be more accommodating to immigrant youth.

1) Develop or increase peer mentorship programs. Research participants spoke about the benefits of matching newcomer youth to other students to help facilitate the social and academic integration process. Mentors or “buddies” can help reduce isolation, make newcomer youth feel welcome, introduce them to new people and activities, and help them understand the expectations of high school.

2) Increase openness and understanding. Students, teachers and principals should all take part in educational activities to prepare them for a more diverse student population and teach them how to welcome new students. Students and teachers should be more aware and their impact on newcomer youth and practice openness and understanding to make them feel comfortable. Stronger encouragement for these practices should come from principals, and fellow teachers and students.

3) Develop communication strategies and partnerships with newcomer parents. Parents may be excluded from their children’s high school experience when they are not aware of the points of access to the system or they face language barriers in communicating with the school. Schools need to develop strategies that will enable parents to participate more and to inform them about their children’s education.

4) Increase social opportunities for newcomer youth. Newcomer youth need to be aware of and have access to social opportunities with other students within the school. This will help them to develop stronger social networks, understand youth culture and orient them to the type of activities that are available to them.

5) Develop leadership opportunities for youth. Encourage newcomer youth to take on leadership roles to increase their involvement and opportunities within the school. This can also provide valuable growth and learning for newcomers and Canadian born youth within the school and can increase full student representation in decision making.

6) Develop a welcoming, representative learning environment. Schools should be more welcoming to newcomers and be a place where all students feel represented and valued. Steps should be taken to incorporate these qualities into schools so that they are structurally, behaviorally and visually more welcoming to newcomer youth.

Pathways to Success: What School Boards Can Do

A number of research participants spoke about the importance of change in Waterloo Region at the school board level, so that schools will have the support they need and be empowered to make meaningful changes in their learning environments. Key informants and teachers in particular felt that changes within the school needed to begin at the school board level in order to be sustainable.

1) *Hire qualified, quality teachers.* Hiring practices should prioritize teachers who understand diversity issues, are understanding of the various needs of their students, and who are representative of the student population. Current teachers should be adequately trained on diversity issues and be acknowledged and supported for their commitment to these efforts.

2) *Improve multicultural training of teachers, including ESL teachers.* Teachers are not always prepared for working with diverse populations, or properly educated on the issues and realities that accompany newcomer youth when they arrive in Canada. Annual, mandatory education and training for teachers should be incorporated into all high schools.

3) *Increase subsidies and make them more available to newcomer youth.* Make sure that newcomer youth are aware of subsidies for books and extra-curricular activities. Decrease overly-bureaucratic processes in order to receive these subsidies.

4) *Provide orientation to newcomer parents.* This will ensure that parents are well-informed when their children enroll in school. Provide interpretation or translation for parents to stay informed.

Note: Just prior to the release of this report, the Waterloo Catholic District School Board launched a Newcomer Reception Centre, located in the former St. Francis Catholic Elementary School. The Reception Centre is meant to welcome newcomer students and parents, assess students to determine how schools can respond to the needs of each student more effectively, provide information to parents and students about the school system, and offer networking opportunity for newcomer families.

Pathways to Success: What the Provincial Education System Can Do

Research participants also stressed the importance of systems-level change regarding the support for and response to immigrant youth in high school. A number of research participants identified the importance of change in government priorities regarding the needs of immigrant youth in high school.

1) *Increase funding for partnership between schools and community organizations serving newcomers.* A few research participants acknowledged the value and importance of partnerships between schools and community programs such as the YMCA settlement services. Strengthening these partnerships will benefit schools, families and communities.

2) *Incorporate a more comprehensive, intensive ESL program.* Research participants suggested changes to the current ESL curriculum, such as positioning grammar as a central component of their ESL learning priorities in order to improve their written and verbal English skills, and making ESL more intensive to prepare students for quicker integration into mainstream classes.

3) *Value quality education for all youth in school.* Ideas about quality education should consider what each child requires in order to complete high school

successfully. This should be an ongoing message within government and communities. Especially for youth who experience an “education gap” from going in and out of school in their home countries, strategies should be explored so that these youth are not pushed out of the high school system before they are ready to leave.

Note: Six Ways: Transforming High School in Ontario are 6 new programs offered through the Ministry of Education with the goal of offering Ontario high school students additional ways of accumulating credits to graduate that are based on the needs and each student. The Lighthouse Projects is one of these programs, offering credit recovery, alternative education, apprenticeship opportunities, college connections, and focusing on success for targeted groups such as ESL students. For more information on these programs, go to:

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/6ways/welcome.html>

4) Develop support for newcomer parents. As newcomer parents may not be aware of how the Canadian school system is structured, for each school, there should be a designated liaison who can ensure families get the information they need when they arrive.

5) Offer more support, programs, and time for newcomer youth and their families to transition into the school system. After families arrive in Canada, they should be given more support in transitioning their children into school. As the primary institution allowing children to integrate into Canadian society, schools should be well equipped with the programs and services they need to play this role.

Pathways to Success: What Community Members Can Do

Research participants identified how communities as a whole have a responsibility to support newcomer youth and their families in Waterloo Region. Research participants spoke about the importance of immigrants being valued for their skills and education everywhere in the community.

1) Be more welcoming to newcomers. Communities should work to increase understanding of immigrants and to welcome them as an important part of the social, cultural and economic make-up of Waterloo Region.

2) Acknowledge and value the potential and skills of newcomers. A variety of research participants spoke about the importance of the Waterloo Region community in being more open to the skills, abilities and credentials of immigrants and in supporting newcomers in getting employment.

3) Adapt to the changing reality and the changing population. Communities should be open, flexible and adaptive to interact with newcomers and to value what they bring to the Waterloo Region.

4) Increase newcomer-friendly policies and representation of newcomers in decision-making roles. Newcomers should be adequately represented (rather than tokenistic) in

decision-making roles in communities to ensure appropriate input into policies and other decisions that affect them.

5) *Make immigrant youth aware of positive role models.* Wherever possible organizations and communities should help connect newcomer youth with positive role models that can provide them with mentorship and confidence in themselves.

Summary of Suggested Pathways to Success

<i>Level</i>	<i>Suggestion</i>
Youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be patient, persevere and don't be afraid to ask for help • Make friends strategically • Get involved • Believe in yourself • Talk to your parents • Be friendly and open-minded towards newcomer youth (for Canadian-born youth)
Parents and Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get involved any way you can • Talk to your children and encourage them in school • Be understanding of the changes your children are going through
Individual Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop or increase peer mentorship programs • Increase openness and understanding • Develop communication strategies and partnerships with newcomer parents • Increase social opportunities for newcomer youth • Develop leadership opportunities for youth • Develop a welcoming, representative learning environment
School Boards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hire qualified, quality teachers • Improve multicultural training of teachers, including ESL teachers • Increase subsidies and make them more available to newcomer youth • Provide orientation to newcomer parents
Provincial Education System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase funding for partnership between schools and community organizations serving newcomers • Incorporate a more comprehensive, intensive ESL program • Value quality education for all youth in school • Develop support for newcomer parents • Offer more support, programs, and time for newcomer youth and their families to transition into the school system

Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be more welcoming to newcomers • Acknowledge and value the potential and skills of newcomers • Adapt to the changing reality and the changing population • Increase newcomer-friendly policies and representation of newcomers in decision-making roles • Make immigrant youth aware of positive role models
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Discussion

The findings of this research study illustrate the complexity of the experience of immigrant youth. Youth and their families generally have high expectations of what Canada and a Canadian education can provide for them, however, there are many challenges preventing these expectations from being met. Research participants described both examples of positive efforts leading to positive academic and social outcomes for youth, and numerous individual, family, and systems-level barriers to their success. In this section, we attempt to understand the complexity of the experiences of immigrant youth by providing an integrative analysis and drawing conclusions to the research findings for Waterloo Region and perhaps communities of similar size and immigrant population.

Additional Challenges

Immigrant Youth Face Many Challenges and Pressures, in Addition to Pressures Faced by all Youth

Based on interviews and focus groups with key informants, immigrant youth, immigrant parents and teachers, it seems clear that immigrant youth deal with numerous pressures, stresses and challenges as a result of their experiences as immigrants, in addition to all the other stresses that high-school aged youth are confronted with. These challenges range from having to learn a new language, to providing economic, emotional and social support to their parents, to dealing with social isolation and bullying in school. Some youth are also dealing with the memory and results of the trauma experienced in their home country. For these reasons, immigrant youth may be more vulnerable and have more barriers to success than Canadian-born youth.

Resiliency

Immigrant Youth Show Remarkable Resiliency

In spite of incredible changes in their lives, academic and social pressures at school, demands and responsibilities at home, and a variety of other challenges, immigrant youth show a remarkable amount of patience, flexibility and resiliency. Youth involved in the research described a number of creative coping mechanism to help them succeed in school and adjust to life in a new country, even when faced with countless obstacles.

Many show strength for themselves and for their parents, find ways of linking themselves to people who can help them, and are amazingly optimistic about their current situation and their future. Youth involved in the research project presented as very mature young adults and were analytic and articulate about their experiences. Even though they faced new challenges daily, immigrant youth involved in this research generally seemed to find the resources they needed to survive and even excel.

Ongoing Tensions

Tension Exists Between Expectations and Available Supports

Even though some immigrant youth arrive in Canada with little or no support around them, and are new to the Canadian school system, our findings show that teachers, fellow students, and parents have high expectations of them. Many youth interviewed for the research felt pressured by the expectations of those around them, the desire to meet those expectations, and the search for supports necessary to help them succeed. Although high social and academic expectations were experienced by these youth from a number of different places, a lack of planning to accommodate immigrant youth was noted, with few resources available to offer help in a meaningful way. This tension forced youth to be more resourceful, extending their capacity to cope on their own even further.

Lack of System Response

Individualized Responses Exist, but there is a lack of a Coordinated System Response

Research data shows that positive responses to the needs of immigrant youth do exist. Research participants identified the importance of teachers who were understanding and supportive, spoke about other students who befriended immigrant youth, and identified parents who found ways to support their children through role modeling and listening. Research participants also described the positive impact that these individuals had on immigrant youth.

Although the majority of research participants could identify examples of positive supports for youth, research data also suggests that there is a lack of a coordinated system response in Waterloo Region high schools to help address the problems and challenges immigrant youth bring with them into schools. Many positive examples identified were described as unplanned or happenstance, and dependant on the good will of individual people encountered by immigrant youth. Even specialized services and supports that were available seemed to be reactive, rather than proactive, to the needs of immigrant youth. Although a few research participants indicated that some schools offered better responses than others, opinions differed among stakeholders. As a result, youth felt that they were not guaranteed the support they needed, some teachers felt marginalized and unsupported for their efforts, and some schools were identified as over-extended in providing the most basic, support for immigrant youth.

Foundational Factors for Success

Foundational Factors Contributing to the Success of Immigrant Youth in High School are Self Motivation and Support from Someone who Believes in them

Although a number of protective factors were identified through the research, participants described certain factors that were essential in developing a basis or foundation for

success of immigrant youth in high school. Data shows that youth who were successful in school both academically and socially described being self-motivated in their desire to succeed in school and had the support from at least one person such as a parent/caregiver, family member, teacher, mentor or friend who believed in them and gave them encouragement. Research participants said that youth who did well academically generally worked diligently on their school work, had strong beliefs about the importance and value of school, and had established goals for post-secondary education. These youth also had someone, such as a parent or teacher, who encouraged them to do well in school and impressed upon them the importance of education. They also seemed to align themselves with other youth who had strong academic values, which provided them with additional encouragement and support. These protective factors seemed to be consistent among immigrant youth who were doing well.

In contrast, youth who were not doing well in school or who had dropped out of school described the impact on their lives when these foundational factors for success were not present. Lack of family support, conflicts within the family, and lack of guidance and support from family, friends or teachers was a source of considerable stress and frustration for these youth. Although all youth involved in the research study showed incredible resiliency, not all of them had the supports and resources they needed to succeed.

Multi-Level Support

Pathways to Success: All Youth Need Multi-Level Support in Order to Succeed

Although interviews revealed that immigrant youth have the ability to succeed even in extremely difficult circumstances, data also showed that the current education system in Waterloo Region does not ensure the success of immigrant youth at school. As important members and contributors to schools and communities, addressing the needs of immigrant youth should be a priority at all levels. As the recommendations above describe, successful outcomes for immigrant youth depend on actions from youth, parents and families, schools, school boards, government and communities all working together. When intentional support from each of these levels is aligned and consistent, immigrant youth are more likely to fully participate and succeed socially and academically.

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***Centre for Research
and Education
in Human Services***

73 King Street West, Suite 300
Kitchener, Ontario N2G 1A7
Phone: (519) 741-1318 Fax: (519) 741-8262
E-mail: general@crehs.on.ca
Web page: <http://www.crehs.on.ca>