

**An Exploration of the Challenges Faced by Newcomer Students**

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**Abstract**

This research explores the non-linguistic challenges affecting the integration and outcomes of newcomer students at school. Three themes were identified: the specific challenges affecting newcomers' outcomes, the classroom practices that are effective in creating positive outcomes, and the school and community programs that are effective in creating positive outcomes. The paper goes on to examine how practices in a Pacific Northwest school district could be aligned with research and then explores implications for future research and transformed practice.

*Keywords:* Newcomer, refugee, immigrant, psychosocial challenges, integration

### **An Exploration of the Challenges Faced by Newcomer Students**

This literature review explores the research on challenges experienced by newcomer students in the U.S. school system. I will focus on the impacts of the issues identified in the research as well as the classroom practices and school programs that aid in creating positive outcomes for newcomer students. Though the linguistic challenges for newcomer students can be a major concern for educators, this paper focuses primarily on research discussing the non-linguistic issues faced by these students. I found the topic of newcomers in education to be significant as U.S. census data from 2021 accounted for 649,000 children aged 5-17 who had been in the U.S. for less than three years. Integrating these newcomers into the school system and their communities at large requires an understanding of the newcomer experience and the challenges that they face, which is why I aimed to further my understanding of this vulnerable population. Within the literature review, the research covers populations that fall under the umbrella term of newcomer including forced migrants and refugees.

#### **Context**

Locally, an estimate of around 600 students, or approximately 75% of the foreign-born student population enrolled in a public school district located in the Puget Sound region of Washington State entered in 2010 or later. This district has over 500 students who are not citizens which makes up approximately 70% of the foreign-born population (NCES). From the U.S. Census, over 10% of the population in this Puget Sound city between 2018-2022 was made up of foreign-born persons. Situating myself within this region, I have recognized a growing need for professionals within schools who are equipped to work with immigrant children. On a larger scale, the population of immigrants in Washington State comprised approximately 14.9% of the state's total population based on 2021 data (U.S. Census). Changes in federal immigration

policies and the resulting impacts of these changes led multiple Washington school districts to identify themselves as “safe zones” in 2017 for immigrant students wherein they support the right for all students, regardless of immigration status, to access a free public education (NEA). Though not all districts may classify themselves as safe zones, according to the Plyer vs. Doe Supreme Court ruling, public schools may not deny admission based on immigrant status or attempt to disclose a student’s document status.

The U.S. is a nation of immigrants who bring with them their culture, customs, language, religion, and more. Out of over 46 million foreign-born individuals living in the U.S. over 14 million of them entered the U.S. in 2010 or later according to U.S. census estimates (U.S. Census). The U.S. has seen an almost 30% increase in the immigrant population from 2005-2022 and continues to grow in part due to the resumption of immigration processes that halted during the COVID-19 pandemic (NPR). The process of immigrating is more often than not a difficult period for families and their children. Beyond the challenges of the physical and legal processes of moving from one country to another, many families who immigrate do so out of necessity and carry a lot of emotional turmoil that comes with this major life event. Additionally, these families and their children may experience a sense of culture shock as they navigate a new setting and school system. Children who are immigrating to the U.S. may identify as refugees, especially given the current circumstances of war and political unrest across the globe.

Welcoming refugees into our communities requires an added awareness and knowledge of how to support them considering the situations they have endured. Schools play a vital role in the integration process for recent immigrants and are often able to connect students and their families to additional resources within their communities. Throughout the integration process, schools not only support students' academic success, but they also support students' social and

emotional well-being. As educators, we will likely see more newcomer students in our classrooms, and being aware of the challenges they face puts us in a better position to support them.

### **Importance**

My student teaching experience exposed me to a diverse classroom that was made up of many students who were labeled English Language Learners (ELLs) and had immigrant backgrounds. I chose to pursue my ELL certification to best support my future students as I recognized a growing number of multilingual learners in the classroom in recent years. Learning how to best support language needs was a crucial educational experience, however, in practice, I recognized that students were not just struggling linguistically, but also with the overall adjustment process. My student teaching experience combined with my ELL certification education inspired me to seek out research discussing the challenges that non-English speaking students face, beyond just the linguistic barriers. Though language and the ability to communicate play a vital role in helping our students succeed, many issues related to the experience of being an immigrant in the U.S. arise within the classroom that deserve the attention of educators and administrators. I saw how very early on in the school year students were making connections between lessons in the classroom and their own lived experiences of immigration. For example, one student was quick to connect experiences of war and oppression from the social studies textbook to the unrest she had left behind in her home country. This same student also shared the difficulties she and her family were experiencing having left family behind in a war-torn country. Another student expressed his difficulties navigating his identities at home versus at school as he experienced cultural clashes and differences in values. These examples were just a few of what students were openly offering to share, and I recognized that

other students were also facing these same issues and more in private. Many of my students from immigrant backgrounds felt pressure to adjust not only for themselves but for their families as well. I saw these stressors appear most frequently during conferences as students often had to navigate translating for their parents, upholding their parents' academic expectations, and adjusting to the U.S. school system. I was lucky in the sense that I had so many students of immigrant backgrounds because they were able to provide support to one another in a way that I could not as they found commonalities to bond over. Students were quick to form friendships over shared cultures, favorite foods, and stories of their home countries, and it was thanks to the rich diversity and strong sense of community in the classroom that I felt like students were able to overcome some of the challenges of being a newcomer. I wondered, however, how a student who was isolated as the sole newcomer in a classroom would experience these challenges differently and what their adjustment to a new school would look like. I was inspired to learn more about what programs and policies are in place at the different levels within a school to support positive outcomes for newcomer students. The opportunities that I had to discuss with students and learn more about their backgrounds showed me that there are a lot of underlying challenges that students face that are non-academic and affect their daily lives both within and outside of school. Without these chances to speak to these students and to get to know more about their backgrounds, I would have been entirely unaware of how they most needed my support. I recognize how important it is for myself and other educators to be a person that students feel comfortable sharing the struggles they face that are non-academic as well.

I found myself feeling like I needed to have all the solutions for my students myself, so through this project, I aim to discover more about resources outside of the immediate classroom to further support my students. It is my goal to be a part of a school community that can

confidently point students and their families toward the resources they need, involve parents in the lives of their students, connect families within the school, and harbor the wealth of knowledge that comes with being a part of a diverse community. Similarly, my hope is for students to feel like they are equipped for success as they navigate living in a new place and attending a new school. In my experience, to better understand and then address students' challenges, we needed to create a trusting relationship with students through a sense of community within the classroom and the school. The school that I student taught at hosted a multicultural appreciation night wherein students and their families shared food, games, art, dances, stories, and more from their cultures. This singular event was effective in establishing a true sense of community for students and families alike as they were able to exchange stories as well as showcase parts of their identities, which created a real sense of pride for many. My emphasis on building relationships with students and their families is helpful for later on being able to be a source of aid for those struggling, however, it's also important to note that it's unfair to assume that all recent immigrants are struggling.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to curate the research surrounding this topic to gain a greater understanding of the challenges that newcomer students face so that teachers and peers can best support our newcomer students. I intend to deepen my knowledge of the newcomer experience so that I can become a resource for my future newcomer students and their families. I aim to create a school environment that is welcoming and supportive of newcomers to ease the challenges related to integration as newcomers continue to join our communities.

### **Focal Questions**

These three questions guide this literature review:

1. What are the specific challenges related to the adjustment of newcomer students at school according to the research?
2. According to the research, what classroom practices have been effective in creating positive outcomes for newcomer students?
3. According to the research, what school programs and procedures have been effective in creating positive outcomes for newcomer students?

### **Literature Review**

This literature review seeks to examine the research that addresses the challenges that newcomer students face and how-to best support students through this transitional period in their lives. In examining the research, I am aiming to identify the specific issues related to the adjustment of newcomer students at school as well as the practices that have been effective in creating positive outcomes for newcomer students. The term newcomer typically describes people who have arrived in their new country within the last three years, however, I include research on recent immigrants who have been settled for longer than three years in order to expand the breadth of the available data. Similarly, when referring to the term newcomer in this review, it applies to additional categories of recent immigrants including refugees, first-generation youth, and unaccompanied youth. In this review, positive outcomes pertain to the academic and social-emotional well-being of newcomer students.

Although linguistic barriers present a key struggle for many newcomer students, the challenges faced by newcomer students go beyond just the linguistic domain (Hilburn, 2014). This review will focus primarily on research detailing some of the psychosocial challenges for newcomer students which include but are not limited to challenges related to social exclusion,

discrimination, acculturative stress, and sense of belonging. It should be noted that when referring to the adjustment experiences of newcomer students, the research is often describing the processes of assimilation or acculturation within the school context. Assimilation refers to the adoption of the new culture and results in a loss of the existing culture, while acculturation refers to adopting some facets of the new culture while still retaining one's own culture. Though many of the outcomes used in the studies are related to academics, components of belonging and adjustment are directly tied to acculturation or assimilation. On occasion, the research covered in the literature review refers to the social-ecological model when discussing acculturative stress and the additional challenges newcomers face. The social-ecological model developed by Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s describes the interacting tiers of systems affecting one's development. These include the range of individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and policy systems at play. For a newcomer experiencing these systems in an entirely new sense, it is important to recognize how these factors interact and contribute to the challenges they may be experiencing.

In this review, I identify three major themes. First, I analyze the existing research to understand the challenges that newcomers face and the strategies proposed to address these challenges. The second theme focuses on the strategies aimed at addressing the challenges for newcomer students at the classroom level, including teacher and peer interventions. Finally, the third theme discusses research on the school-level programs and procedures that aid in creating positive outcomes for newcomer students.

### **Identifying the Challenges for Newcomer Students**

This section summarizes the challenges identified in the research that newcomers face at school and how these challenges impact their outcomes. The presented research

focuses primarily on social-emotional challenges rather than linguistic even though the two can be intertwined, as linguistic challenges and their associated recommendations require a focus of their own. Some of the non-linguistic challenges faced by newcomer students identified in the research are related to experiencing major life events, a sense of belonging at school, issues of social exclusion and discrimination, familial separation, acculturative stress, and more.

### ***Big Life Events***

In this subsection, I examine the research on how life events impact newcomer students. Many newcomer youth have experienced significant or traumatic life events that may impact them throughout their transition process. The covered research addressed the experiences of newcomer students which included exposure to war or other forms of unrest in their home country and the associated outcomes. One example of a study examining these events is Patel et al. (2016) who conducted a mixed-methods study concerning family stressors and academic outcomes for newcomer youth. The quantitative analyses focused on family-level stressors including parental separation, family conflict, and life events as predictors of academic achievement and externalizing symptoms while the qualitative analyses addressed the family stressors more in-depth. In this study, family conflict referred to intergenerational conflicts related to acculturation. Depending on the levels of exposure to the dominant culture, newcomers may experience acculturation at varying extents or rates. These acculturation gaps that appear amongst family members often create added stress and conflict. Family life events referred to immigrant-specific experiences as well as events unspecific to immigrants including divorce, parental conflict, legal troubles, illness, and death. Quantitative results showed an association between more family life events and

lower GPAs; however, the effect was lower for students who had experienced separation from family. There was also an association between more family conflict and more externalizing symptoms, which refer to aggressive or disobedient behaviors. From the qualitative data, family separation was the most commonly mentioned stressor with acculturative family conflict the second most mentioned. The familial and cultural stressors that immigrant youth face play an important role in their outcomes both in and outside of school. Learning to better understand the risk factors for immigrant youth surrounding their family circumstances is crucial for helping them through a major transition period in their lives where support is needed most.

The effects of pre-migration events experienced by newcomers materialize as stressors negatively impacting the process of integration. In another study by Patel et al. (2017), researchers explored the psychosocial adjustment of newcomer students in the U.S. through a qualitative study assessing academic and psychosocial outcomes. Unlike the first study, this research focused specifically on war exposure as a major stressor impacting refugee students' outcomes. In this research, the authors addressed the growing need for supporting refugee youth, from a social-ecological perspective which considers the various contexts influencing newcomers both pre-migration and post-migration. Participants for this study were 184 refugee and newcomer youth who had been in the U.S. for an average of 3.5 years, with 57 of them having been exposed to war. Data was collected via online questionnaires and included both student and teacher reports on daily life stressors, acculturative stressors, symptoms of anxiety, and conduct problems, as well as GPA data to measure academic achievement. The findings from this study indicated that the newcomer students who were exposed to war experienced more self-reported and teacher-reported

anxiety, self-reported conduct problems, and had lower academic achievement than students who were not exposed to war. For students who were not exposed to war, acculturative stressors were a predictor for self-reported anxiety, conduct problems, and lower academic achievement. Both Patel (2016) and Patel (2017) found that experiences pre-migration and post-migration including significant life events and acculturation stressors can negatively impact newcomers' academic and mental health outcomes. This particular study highlighted an important area needing attention for refugee students specifically, which was the exposure to war and other traumatic events that have lasting impacts post-migration. Having a better understanding of the challenges that newcomer students face both before migrating and during the acculturation process allows teachers and other school staff to help these students better navigate the challenges they encounter.

While both of the previous studies identified the academic and psychological outcomes resulting from these major life stressors, the following study by Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) investigated the impact of school on these outcomes. Though students may arrive still working through harmful events, there are ways to address these issues in the school setting. The researchers aimed to identify potential relationships between exposure to adversities and mental health using measures of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), symptoms of depression, and self-efficacy, with a moderator variable of a sense of school belonging. The sample included 76 students aged 12-19 who lived in Massachusetts and Maine having resettled from Somalia. Participants took part in structured interviews and verbal questionnaires utilizing the War Trauma Screening Scale, the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale, the PTSD Index, the Depression Self-rating Scale, and Multidimensional Scales of Perceived Self-efficacy. After the data collection, researchers

performed hierarchical regression analyses which showed that exposure to adversities had a significant effect on symptoms of PTSD and depression as well as being associated with lower self-efficacy. In the second level of the analyses, a greater sense of school belonging was associated with lower depression and higher self-efficacy regardless of exposure to adversities. This study was cross-sectional and utilized snowball sampling which limited the interpretation and generalizability of the findings, however, the findings from this research indicated the important role of school environments in the adjustment process and psychological well-being of these refugee students. Though refugee students face many challenges during the period of resettlement, school communities have the crucial ability to ease some of these challenges.

### ***Attitudes Toward School***

The research included in this subsection identified the school environment as a key piece in the adjustment process of newcomer students, which involves a sense of belonging at school and relationships with peers and teachers. Each of these has the ability to impact the psychosocial and academic development of newcomer students, even while considering their exposure to adverse experiences (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). The following study by Chiu et al. (2012) assessed native versus immigrant students' attitudes toward school and sense of belonging at school by measuring their cognitive and emotional engagement in school. A sample of 276,165 15-year-old students from 41 countries participated in a questionnaire that utilized a Likert scale to measure the outcomes of attitude toward school and sense of belonging at school. The explanatory variables recorded in the questionnaire included family, school, classmates, and country characteristics. The survey data was used in combination with math test scores to measure academic achievement. The findings from

this research concluded that there was a weak correlation between students' attitudes toward school and their sense of belonging at school. Researchers found that immigrant students reported better attitudes toward school but a lesser sense of belonging at school compared to native students, and furthermore, immigrant students had lesser academic achievement than native students. Data also showed that perceived strong teacher-student relationships predicted a greater sense of belonging at school and a better attitude toward school, thus indicating the impactful role of teachers on student outcomes.

Creating an environment where students feel like they can belong is key to supporting their integration. Using contrasting methodologies, Prior and Niesz (2013) conducted a narrative inquiry surrounding the stories of youth who were Karen refugees from Myanmar and their experiences of education in the U.S. The authors aimed to address a gap in research concerning refugee youth as opposed to immigrant youth and did so through the use of narratives to better understand the experiences and views of the children themselves. This study included three Karen students who were in Preschool and Kindergarten in the U.S. and focused on their adaptation to the American early childhood classroom. The narratives included oral histories from the families, interviews with the youth, and drawings over the course of four months of research. Researchers recorded interviews with the families of the children to gain an understanding of their experiences before arriving in the United States. The data recorded through the interviews and artwork was analyzed in order to produce the narrative of each student's experience over time, as well as to identify themes across each of the participants' experiences. A commonality identified across all participants was a change in experience over time which included descriptions of sadness or anger at the beginning of the school year to descriptions of

happiness at school by the end of the study. Each child also shared experiences of building bridges between home and school either through familiar items, family, or developing connections with peers by identifying similarities. Additionally, a common theme found among participants was experiences of cultural dissonance which refers to confusion or conflict resulting from the exposure to a new cultural environment. Immigrant students' lower sense of belonging at school or challenges to adjust to a new environment may be representative of the context of the immigration experiences for many children, as school is likely the foundation for their adaptation to a new country. The challenges related to acculturation for newcomers and their families can affect their sense of belonging and attitudes toward school, which may disrupt their integration in the larger context. Creating an environment in which students feel they belong is just one area in which educators may be able to ease the burdens so many newcomer students face.

### ***Discrimination***

Researchers identified incidences of discrimination, or more specifically ethnic harassment, as a major concern for newcomer students and their adjustment to school. Bayram Özdemir et al. (2021) conducted research with the Youth and Diversity Project in Sweden aimed at understanding the experiences of acculturative stress including cultural clashes with parents and ethnic victimization in school for immigrant adolescents. As concluded by Patel (2016) and Patel (2017), acculturative stressors can lead to lower academic achievement and conduct problems at school. The authors sought to address acculturative stressors across multiple contexts to identify possible relationships between experiences at school and home. This was a longitudinal study done through surveys that included 1065 seventh-grade students in Sweden with immigrant backgrounds. Survey data

included experiences of cultural clashes between the adolescents and their parents, experiences of ethnic victimization at school, feeling in between cultures, depressive symptoms, self-esteem, and demographic characteristics. From the survey data, 15% of adolescents reported high levels of acculturative stress, 23% average levels, and 58% low levels. Adolescents who experienced high levels of cultural clashes at home had higher levels of depressive symptoms, had lower self-esteem, were more likely to feel between cultures, and were more likely to experience ethnic victimization at school. The experiences of ethnic victimization at school were associated with feeling in between cultures and with having poor psychological adjustment. Furthermore, first-generation immigrant adolescents were more likely to experience cultural clashes at home and ethnic victimization at school than students who were second-generation immigrants.

Entering a new school environment already designated as an outsider with the newcomer label may contribute to students' experiences of discrimination. Newcomer students must grapple with balancing cultures while making themselves fit into an environment of peers that may push back against their integration and alienate them. Similar to the previous study, a review conducted by Pottie et al. (2015) revealed that across many immigration nationalities, first-generation immigrant adolescents experience higher rates of bullying and peer aggression than their native-born peers. These sources highlighted an area where newcomers need greater support in their experiences of acculturation and the need to create a sense of belonging for these youth. Experiences of discrimination and the resulting social isolation have great impacts on social and academic outcomes for newcomer students as well as creating the impression that these students are unwelcome in this new environment.

While newcomer students are expected to integrate at school, regular victimization by their peers impedes this and leads to multiple negative outcomes. Experiences of bullying and more specifically ethnic victimization affect students' relationships with themselves, their families, and those at school. In a separate study done by Bayram Özdemir and Stattin (2014), the researchers found that ethnic victimization at school led to poor self-esteem and an expectation of academic failure, marking an added outcome for immigrant students. In this study, Bayram Özdemir and Stattin assessed the relationship between ethnic harassment and school adjustment using mediator variables of depressive symptoms and self-esteem along with moderator variables of positive relationships with teachers and school democracy. The outcome variables were school satisfaction, cutting class, and perceived academic failure. Data was collected from 330 students in seventh through ninth grade from immigrant backgrounds in Sweden through both focus group interviews and questionnaires at two points with a one-year time interval. During the study, around 80% of the participants reported experiencing at least one form of ethnic harassment. Those who experienced more ethnic harassment were more likely to report depressive symptoms, academic challenges, cutting classes, low self-esteem, and low school satisfaction. The exposure to ethnic harassment led to a decrease in self-esteem over time and an increase in expectations of academic failure, however, depressive symptoms were not a significant mediator for the association with school adjustment outcomes. Ethnic harassment led to poor self-esteem when students had poor relationships with their teachers or perceived their schools as being less democratic, which led to low reports of school satisfaction and reports of feeling unsuccessful at school. These effects were not observed when students experienced the opposite with their teacher relationships or perceptions of school

democracy. Experiences of ethnic harassment and other forms of bullying in schools add to the already significant challenges that many newcomer students arrive with.

### *Academic Achievement*

The mental health challenges identified by researchers not only present as psychological outcomes for students but also may lead to academic challenges as well. A multitude of factors impact any student's ability to succeed academically, however, experiences of depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, social isolation, and bullying specific to newcomers have been shown to have negative academic impacts. An example of a study that assessed the factors of social inclusion and exclusion affecting the psychosocial and academic outcomes of immigrant children was conducted by Oxman-Martinez and Choi (2014). The potential factors related to inclusion and exclusion that they covered included social isolation, psychological isolation, perceived peer discrimination, perceived teacher discrimination, and inclusive school environment. The measured outcomes for this study were children's self-esteem, social competence, and academic grades. Researchers utilized data from a sub-sample of the New Canadian Children and Youth Study which included 515 foreign-born immigrant children aged 11-13. The findings from the data showed that children who were psychologically isolated and who had higher levels of perceived discrimination from their peers and teachers were more likely to have lower levels of self-esteem. An inclusive school environment was positively related to social competence, while psychological isolation and perceived peer and teacher discrimination were negatively related to social competence. The factors with the greatest impact on academic performance were inclusive school environment, social isolation, and perceived teacher discrimination. In this study, perceived discrimination was a predictor for both psychosocial and academic

outcomes, thus highlighting a great need for anti-discrimination education and policies within schools. These findings highlighted the areas that both educators and peers can improve in facilitating newcomers' adjustments to a new place.

Comparatively, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2010) used mixed methodological strategies to research additional contexts affecting newcomer students' academic trajectories that were not included in the Oxman-Martinez and Choi (2014) study. The Longitudinal Immigration Student Adaptation study was conducted over five years and utilized mixed methodology which included student interviews, parent interviews, and case studies conducted during the third year of the study. The 407 participants ranged in age from 9-14 and had spent less than one-third of their life in the United States. Using grades as the quantitative outcome measure in combination with the qualitative data provided by the interviews and case studies, researchers determined five performance pathways for participants: high achievers (23.6% of participants), low achievers (14.4%), precipitous decliners (26.8%), slow decliners (24.3%), and improvers (11%). The factors that contributed to the differences in these trajectories included having two adults in the household, school segregation and school poverty, student's perceptions of school violence, level of academic English proficiency, reported psychological symptoms, gender, and being over-aged for grade. These results demonstrated that there are a multitude of factors that influence newcomer students' success in school and that there is a great need for interventions to support students during this transitional period in their lives.

The research thus far has covered the academic challenges from the student's perspective, however, the insights provided from the teacher's perspective can be beneficial to identifying the challenges in schools. A qualitative collective case study by Hilburn

(2014) examined teachers' perceptions of challenges faced by immigrant students in an attempt to address the needs of immigrant students beyond the linguistic challenges, which have typically been given the most attention in academic research. Six high school civics teachers out of North Carolina participated in three recorded interviews over 7 months. The data from the interviews was compared and contrasted to be coded into categories. The challenges identified by participants included the limitations of a formal curriculum for teaching with an additive approach, the legal status of immigrants leading to acculturation and academic challenges, the new gateway state factor, and the negative social and academic impacts of an anti-immigration climate. These vulnerabilities identified by participants highlight the complexities of the educational and social contexts of immigration beyond just the linguistic dimension. One limitation of this research design was the small sample size of participants which limited the generalizability of the results. This study highlighted multiple social and academic challenges faced by students that require just as much attention as the linguistic challenges. The perception of immigration and immigrant students by teachers and native peers can greatly impact students' social and academic trajectories, which necessitates the implementation of culturally sustaining and additive approaches within schools.

The findings from the research on challenges for newcomer students indicate that the major life events experienced pre- and post-migration not only affect their overall adjustment to a new country but also may play a significant role in the social and academic attainment of these students at school. Understanding the experiences that are unique to these students can provide educators with the opportunity and awareness to best support them as they endure a difficult transition in their lives. This research helps to examine the

interacting systems that affect newcomer students' integration into the U.S. school system, which can help inform the action taken to combat the challenges that students face.

### **Classroom Practices that Promote Positive Outcomes**

A second theme I identified focuses on the classroom practices that promote positive outcomes for newcomer students. This includes classroom environment, teacher relationships, peer relationships, and pedagogical practices. Research in this section is meant to focus on smaller-scale interventions that have been recognized to be effective in supporting newcomer students.

The school atmosphere is important in establishing the basis for a newcomer's integration where both the academic and relationship aspects hold great value in their ability to succeed. A quantitative study done by Nakhaie et al. (2022) examined newcomer youth's perceptions of a welcoming school environment and how these perceptions affected their academic persistence. Using academic success as an indicator of newcomer students' integration, researchers sought to determine how the perceptions of their experiences inside the classroom affected their outcomes. The researchers surveyed 125 newcomer youth in Ontario, Canada, and collected data on academic persistence, teacher support, family cohesion, school peer environment, language proficiency, and length in Canada. The researchers used descriptive statistics of the measures and performed multiple regression analyses to determine the statistical significance of the data. The findings from this research concluded that newcomer youth were more likely to persist academically when they perceived that their teachers supported them, believed in their success, and listened to them. Similarly, newcomer youth were more likely to persist academically when they perceived that their peers were open to diversity, exhibited cultural humility, and would respect and

interact with them. These findings emphasized the importance of the classroom environment in creating both a positive opportunity for integration and a positive learning environment. Having this sort of foundation wherein newcomer students feel a sense of trust with their teachers and peers promotes positive inter-group relationships that can promote a more seamless transition and academic success.

Mentors can be an effective way to support newcomers in what can otherwise be an isolating transition period. Though mentors of newcomers may share similar experiences or have background knowledge of the newcomer experience, not all peers may be equipped to collaborate without a proper education on the matter. A literature review by Crooks et al. (2022) examined the role of peer interventions in supporting newcomers through mentoring, prejudice reduction, and bystander intervention approaches. These researchers described the need to promote the mental well-being of newcomer students and equity in schools through engaging non-newcomers. Helping students not only be mentors to their newcomer peers but also teaching them prejudice reduction strategies is crucial for reducing the incidences of discrimination. Similarly, considering the important role of relationship building in promoting positive outcomes, peers must be taught the proper skills for engaging with newcomers through an equity lens.

Along these lines, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2009) examined the role of relationships in school in academic engagement and achievement. Researchers utilized data from the aforementioned mixed methods Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study which included student interviews, parent interviews, and survey responses. The study used GPA as a measure of academic achievement and considered academic engagement to include both cognitive and behavioral engagement, and school relationships to include emotional

school-based support and tangible school-based support. Other variables that were considered in this analysis included age, gender, country of origin, parent and family factors, perceptions of school violence, and behavioral engagement. Tangible school-based support included the perception that there were people at school that students could count on for help, while emotional school-based support related to the perception that there was someone at school that the students could count on and who cared about them. Cognitive engagement was related to students' enjoyment of learning and participating in school, and behavioral engagement items referenced participation in class and completing work. The researchers identified behavioral engagement as a significant predictor of academic performance and determined that cognitive engagement, self-efficacy, and school-based supportive relationships were all predictors of behavioral engagement. More specifically, emotional school-based support was the most significant variable in behavioral engagement. Additional analyses found that students' perceptions of school violence were negatively related to GPA, however, positive caring relationships in school diminished this effect.

In addition to the significant nature of student-teacher relationships, peers of newcomer students are important to the integration process because their actions can lead to either positive or worsened outcomes. Earnest peer support relies on relationship building that often cannot happen without first addressing the potential for negative attitudes towards newcomers in a classroom. A set of researchers that sought to investigate the impacts of intervention programs on attitudes toward refugees was Turner and Brown (2008) who conducted their study surrounding the Friendship Project in the UK. This program was aimed at reducing prejudice toward refugees through anti-racist and multicultural approaches in the classroom. The anti-racist aspect of the curriculum asked that students

reflect on their existing attitudes, while the multicultural approach taught students about the culture and experiences of refugees. The Friendship Project consisted of four weekly lessons surrounding the refugee experience and developing empathy toward refugees. For this study, 87 English elementary school students aged 9 to 11 participated from three schools in Dover, Kent. From each of the three schools, one class completed the Friendship Project while the other class acted as a control. Researchers surveyed participants before and after the program measuring attitudes toward refugees, attitudes toward English and French people, preferred acculturation strategy, perceived fit of acculturation strategies, and empathy toward refugees. For the post-test, each of the participating schools was tested between one to seven weeks after the intervention to compare short-term versus long-term impact. In the short term, participants of the intervention saw more positive attitudes toward refugees, however, there was no significant effect on attitudes in the long term.

Additionally, the Friendship Program had no effect on empathy for either group. Before the program, both participant groups preferred separation from the host group or assimilation for refugees, while after the program the intervention group had an increased preference for integration which included contact with the host community and maintaining their cultural identities. This program showcased the importance of education surrounding immigrant and refugee experiences, and though there is work to be done in terms of promoting empathy and reducing prejudice within classrooms, these findings suggest that positive change can be made in terms of peer support for newcomers. The researchers noted that it is also important to consider the context surrounding these interventions as existing biases from peers, families, and educators may play a role in the reception of newcomers in schools and communities.

Considering the challenges newcomers face in school, peers can play a pivotal role in their outcomes including influencing their self-esteem, academic achievement, and experiences of social inclusion (Oxman-Martinez & Choi, 2014). These researchers concluded that the school environment as well as peer and teacher relationships had a significant effect on self-esteem and academic performance. Newcomers' self-concept and identities may be compromised in the school setting, further complicating the integration process. Experiences of harassment and alienation that are tied to the youth's identities can harm them both mentally and academically, which shows an area of need for developing strategies to combat this in schools.

In a study assessing English proficiency and peer interethnic relations as predictors of mathematics achievement, researchers determined that higher English proficiency was related to an increase in academic motivation, however, this effect became non-significant when students perceived a low level of positive peer interethnic relations at their school (Barrett et al., 2012). Even with the proper educational supports in place, the impact of negative social experiences can still dismantle academic progress. One researcher discussed the important point that although educators may encourage community and relationship building, newcomer refugee students may experience difficulties in this sense due to their own experiences of discrimination or distrust of the communities in their home countries (Roxas, 2011). Additionally, the demanding emotional and economic contexts of migration and resettling in a foreign country may make settling and establishing a community difficult. Roxas sought to understand how teachers can build trust and community with their refugee students in an individualized manner that understands the perspectives and specialized needs of their newcomer students. This year-long case study followed the practices of a public middle school teacher in Denver, Colorado who aimed to

connect her refugee students within the classroom and with the community at large. A key strategy this teacher utilized was to gain an understanding of each student's background to determine what may hinder their participation in community building. Early on, students participated in creating classroom expectations and class meetings wherein a sense of safety and support in the classroom was established. Another one of the educator's practices was to encourage frequent collaboration and teamwork with other students to help students feel a connection to their peers. The emphasis on relationships in cultivating positive outcomes has been shown by the evidence to be an effective strategy for supporting newcomer students.

Once relationships and trust have been established, teachers can support their students' processing of emotions. Educators in Washington State concluded that creating a safe space for refugee students to share about their personal lives was effective in supporting their socioemotional needs (Newcomer et al., 2021). Other meaningful strategies for these educators included partnering students to provide peer-mediated support, engaging in continued learning about refugee experiences including participating in a simulation, and creating strong student-teacher relationships by sharing personal stories. Similarly, one study focused on the teachers' perspectives on social-emotional learning (SEL) for refugee students in early elementary (Cho et al., 2019). Particularly, they were interested in how teachers viewed their newcomer students' social-emotional competencies, and what pedagogical approaches they used for developing these skills. They found that the teachers in the study primarily viewed their newcomer students as lacking awareness of social norms and rules and lacking relationship skills. The most commonly used strategies in the classroom were explicit instruction of SEL, creating a positive and caring classroom environment, and encouraging collaboration amongst peers. The authors noted the importance of acknowledging the varying cultural contexts of social-emotional skills and

keeping in mind students' life experiences especially as it relates to their own processing of this significant change in their lives.

This theme of creating a caring environment was carried on with researcher Rabia Hos who conducted an ethnographic study focused on refugee students with limited or interrupted formal education. This researcher sought to understand how one teacher's enactment of ethical care impacted the adjustment of her newcomer students (Hos, 2016). In this teacher's school, sufficient psychological support was not available, so the teachers held the main responsibility for aiding their students' adjustment. The strategies this teacher employed included having patience, flexibility, and empathy for students, establishing routines in a positive classroom environment, advocacy for her students, and building students' confidence. The teacher recognized these strategies as being most helpful in addressing her students' stresses related to migration and acculturation.

### **School and Community-Wide Interventions**

The research covered in theme three discusses the supports and interventions that can be found at a school or community level. This includes community partnerships, mental health counseling interventions, and more.

Immigrant youth's adaptation is influenced by a multitude of factors; however, certain individual-level characteristics may affect their resilience, or ability to adapt. Motti-Stefanidi (2019) identified school climate, educational programs, peer relations, and youth's prior adaptive history to be influential in their ability to adapt, as concluded through evidence from the Athena Studies of Resilient Adaptation project. The developmental competencies identified by Motti-Stefanidi describe how youth respond to the tasks and pressures of school both academically and socially, and how these successes or failures may predict their capacity to adapt. In related

research, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2018) created the risk and resilience model for studying the adaptation of immigrant youth. This model considered the global forces, political and social contexts of reception, microsystems, and individual-level attributes as influences in the different outcomes of newcomer adaptation. Understanding these influences may help those involved with newcomers identify the risks and resources for adaptation.

Schools are a significant piece in connecting students to the necessary resources and promoting positive integration. The specific school-wide practices that meet the socioemotional and academic needs of their newcomers were identified in a multiple case study for seven schools in the United States and Sweden (Martin & Suárez-Orozco, 2018). The researchers focused on three categories of practices which were practices that addressed newcomers' individual needs, school culture practices, and outside partnerships. Intaking newcomer students consisted of a team-based approach made up of teachers, counselors, social workers, and more to welcome students and gather more information from them to assess their needs. Teachers and counselors often encouraged their newcomers to share more about their experiences and difficulties and then paired the newcomer student with a student who shared a similar background. The researchers note that addressing the socioemotional needs of these students and establishing a safe school environment is critical due to their impacts on students' mental health outcomes and academic outcomes. The schools involved in this study created a sense of cultural belonging by affirming the use of multiple languages in student work and daily life at school and by involving parents in their children's schooling. Lastly, schools incorporated community partnerships for increased health and social supports for newcomer families. These community partnerships included community members providing language instruction, internship opportunities, on-site healthcare, nonprofit services, and more. Similarly, a qualitative study

examining the factors for creating a welcoming and inclusive school environment identified factors including community engagement and ongoing professional development to create a shared vision of inclusivity (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021). For these settings, meeting the needs of newcomer students required a network of partnerships among people inside and outside of the school.

Resources and interventions specific to newcomers and refugees address the migration stressors this population endures and may require specialized training. Turning the focus to mental health support, Sullivan and Simonson (2016) conducted a systematic literature review surrounding the research on school-based interventions for refugee students including cognitive behavioral therapy, creative expression, and multi-tiered models. Researchers identified 13 studies that met inclusion criteria, which included a total of 1,433 participants from 26 countries ranging in age from 3 to 19 years old. The studies measured mental health functioning, PTSD, and depression. The most common intervention used across five of the studies was creative expression, which utilizes outlets like art or play to express and process emotions. This form of therapy required trained art therapists to visit schools and yielded positive results for using writing and drawing interventions, but not for music therapy. Four of the studies utilized cognitive behavioral interventions that emphasize skill-building and coping strategies to identify and work through traumas. These interventions had more consistently positive outcomes, however, the strategies required specialized training. Lastly, three studies utilized multimodal interventions that connect students to services at school and only one utilized multi-tiered interventions which are tailored to the individual needs of a student and can include a variety of services including consultations or therapy. The multimodal studies connected students to community-based mental health services at school but did not have consistent positive results.

The multi-tiered interventions had positive results as they provided a range of services based on the specific needs of the individual. This form of intervention is more familiar to school counselors and educators which allows for a greater reach. Providing newcomer or refugee students with the resources to begin to process their emotions and traumas provides them with the chance to find greater success within their school and community at large.

Delivering mental health interventions for newcomers in the school setting can be effective in addressing behaviors while also getting to the root cause of them. Four studies included in a systematic review focused on behavioral interventions for newcomers found that interventions focused on treating traumatic and acculturative stressors reduced behavior difficulties (Bal & Perzigian, 2013). In another systematic review, Tyrer and Fazel (2014) evaluated the mental health interventions for refugee students at the school or community levels. Twenty-one studies met the inclusion criteria which included studies that report on an intervention program that was delivered in schools, refugee camps, or the community, and had a target population between the ages of 2 and 17. From the reviewed interventions, verbal processing and creative arts techniques had the greatest impact on improving symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety. Considering the potential negative psychosocial and academic outcomes for newcomer students, connecting students to mental health interventions is an important step in the integration process.

Connecting newcomer youth with a supportive group outside of the classroom setting can be beneficial in aiding their integration into the larger community. Pryce et al. (2019) studied the effects of a group mentoring program on the experiences of belonging and integration for newcomer youth. The after-school program titled Conversation Club (CC) began in 2009 and partnered with local organizations and libraries before moving into schools. The CC program

offered social support and mentoring to newcomer youth and focused on skills development as students transition into life in Canada. Researchers utilized a sequential mixed methods design which included participant surveys and interviews. Participants for this study were 67 CC members and a comparison group made up of 25 newcomer youth from neighboring schools. The observed effects for the Conversation Club members included a sense of belonging to their peers and the Canadian community, improved communication and social skills, and opportunities for social support.

Experiences of poverty are common for newcomers in any country, and the effects of poverty can go far in impacting the adjustment process and associated outcomes. Students in high-poverty urban schools took part in a City Connects intervention that utilized the collaboration of on-site school counselors and teachers to develop student support plans. Those students who were classified as having intensive needs had access to additional community resources including psychologists, nurses, and community agency staff. Dearing et al. (2016) concluded that those newcomer students who took part in this intervention had higher academic achievement than those who did not receive the intervention. The tailored intervention considered the specific needs of newcomer students and called upon various community resources to support the students in all areas of need. In the Roxas (2011) study, one educator coordinated outings into the community for her refugee students where they could experience academic enrichment activities and visit centers that provided access to different supplies and medical care. Additionally, this educator brought members of the community into the classroom, especially those connected to mental health support.

As determined by the previous studies, connecting students to resources and programs apart from the school itself can lead to positive outcomes inside and outside of the classroom.

Rodriguez (2019) used a mixed-method approach to research the effectiveness of a library-based school district partnership in improving belonging for newcomer youth. Rodriguez conducted interviews with community partners and 22 youth aged 14-18 and later implemented a survey. Sense of belonging was measured across three levels including personal or individual experiences of belonging at school, relational belonging, and community belonging. The study found this library resource to increase the sense of belonging for newcomer youth by creating a space of solidarity and understanding of the newcomer experience. Students described this program as an extension of the school where they felt like they could express themselves without the pressures of speaking the English language or the judgment from teachers or peers. Additionally, this community partnership provided newcomer students with resources and a guided curriculum for navigating school and accessing additional community resources. Students in this study referred to the library as a hub wherein they could build connections and networks in a safe environment.

Another community resource known as the Family Center acted as a liaison between newcomer families and the school as they collaborated to help parents be involved in their children's education and helped families access necessary resources (Newcomer et al., 2021). Related research from Kia Keating & Ellis (2007) determined that a greater sense of belonging at school was associated with greater self-efficacy and lower depression, indicating the important role of school environments and resources in the adjustment process and psychological well-being of refugee students. Establishing safe spaces for newcomers to be able to talk through their experiences and reach necessary support can be an effective strategy for promoting positive outcomes for newcomers.

### **Summary**

The research surrounding the newcomer experience revealed a host of challenges that affect both the academic and psychosocial outcomes of these youth. The newcomer label itself can disguise some of these issues, as the research identified challenges specific to refugees including pre-migration traumas and PTSD. On top of the mental health problems students may encounter, school environments and peer relationships can lead to worsened psychological outcomes (Patel et al., 2017; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). The research identified a sense of belonging at school to be both a major stressor for newcomer students and a key area for successful intervention. Students' sense of belonging in their school plays a role in their success academically and emotionally. Implementing strategies focused on creating a positive learning environment helps to address the issues of discrimination and ethnic harassment for newcomers. Outside of the classroom, the research identified effective measures for creating positive mental health outcomes for students by providing them with the tools to recognize and work through emotional and psychological troubles including low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. Understanding the needs and strategies for supporting this vulnerable population requires the involvement of stakeholders across many different levels. In addressing the challenges and related strategies defined in the research, educators may be able to better support the growing number of newcomer students in this country and ensure that the strategies that they are promoting are effective in practice.

### **Action Plan**

In this project, I have been looking at the challenges experienced by newcomer students. The literature described both the contributing factors for these difficulties and the different layers of support that may influence student outcomes. In this section, I am going to look at recommendations based on the themes from the literature review section which were: the

specific challenges for newcomers, the classroom strategies for promoting positive outcomes, and the school and community practices for promoting positive outcomes.

The major issues affecting newcomer students' outcomes as identified by the research included major life events pre-migration, acculturation stressors, discrimination, and a lower sense of belonging. Researchers pointed to the significance of school environment and relationships in cultivating positive outcomes for newcomer students (Oxman Martinez and Choi, 2014; Nakhaie et al., 2022). In terms of strategies for supporting newcomer students, the themes for areas of support that emerged from the research were teacher and peer relationships, community connections, and mental health support. This action plan culminates the practices found in the literature, the current practices of my chosen site, and my own recommendations.

The specific site I have chosen to explore for this action plan is a school district located in a Western Washington city local to myself. Census data from this city estimates that over 10% of the population is foreign-born. Additionally, it is estimated that around 600 students or close to 75% of the foreign-born student population in this district entered the U.S. in 2010 or later. Since schools cannot require families to disclose their immigration status or undocumented status, the district data for English Language Learners may be interchanged with immigrant data.

It is important to note that English learners are not always immigrants, and this perception may be harmful and lead to inaccurate data.

The resources for supporting newcomers in Washington State public schools are mainly focused on language supports for multilingual learners and are primarily targeted at high school students. The brief practice suggestions for K-8 newcomer students pertain to pre-intake, school orientation, early instructional activities, participation in mainstream instruction, and testing accommodations.

### Teacher and Peer Relationships

Building relationships within schools can be critical to the adaptation of newcomer students as they attempt to make sense of their new environment. Teachers help guide these students through a pivotal time in their lives where a greater understanding and sense of support may be needed. Similarly, the actions of peers hold great influence on the integration of newcomers into the classroom and community at large as they navigate potentially greatly different cultures. Beyond just the academic aspects of school, newcomers may also face the challenges of discrimination, bullying, social isolation, and acculturation. Both teachers and peers can have a great impact on newcomer students' outcomes and must have an understanding of the newcomer experience and the strategies to best support them.

**Table 1**

#### *Inclusive School Environment*

Research	Practice	Recommendation
Students were more likely to participate at school when they perceived that there were people at school who cared for them, supported them, and were invested in their success (Nakhaie et al., 2022; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009).	My district does not list specific practices aimed at promoting supportive relationships among teachers and peers of newcomer students.	Teachers and peers can find ways to connect with newcomer students through strategies such as learning about their stories, their cultural background, learning keywords or phrases in their home language, and providing opportunities for students to incorporate their language and culture into their learning.
Positive peer interethnic relationships led to an increase in academic motivation and participation in classroom community building (Barret et al., 2012; Roxas, 2011).	My district does not list specific practices for creating positive peer interethnic relationships among native-born and newcomer students.	Both teachers and peers of newcomers should work towards an understanding of immigrant experiences and different cultures so that they can develop empathy and the tools to communicate with those from different backgrounds than their own.

<p>A welcoming school environment and a perceived sense of belonging at school affected newcomer students' academic outcomes and psychosocial outcomes including self-efficacy and symptoms of depression (Kia-Keating &amp; Ellis, 2007; Chiu et al., 2012).</p>	<p>My district does not list specific practices for promoting a welcoming school environment for newcomers.</p>	<p>I recommend that teachers create a welcoming school environment for newcomer students by first focusing on building connections with students. Teachers should use multicultural educational strategies wherein all students see themselves represented in the curriculum and multiple perspectives and cultures are shared.</p>
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**Community Connections**

Schools play a key role in the integration of newcomers as they connect families to both academic resources and community-provided resources. The school community itself is an integral piece in establishing a sense of belonging and can be just as important as services found outside of the school. For newcomer families, schools may act as a gateway to their new community. The availability of resources for recent immigrants may affect their experiences of integration into the school community and community at large.

**Table 2**

*Community Building*

Research	Practice	Recommendation
<p>Engaging communities in the integration of newcomers through providing resources for health and social supports was effective in creating a welcoming school environment (Guo-Brennan &amp; Guo-Brennan, 2021; Martin &amp; Suárez-Orozco, 2018; Roxas, 2011).</p>	<p>This school district did not list any specific partners or resources for supporting newcomers.</p>	<p>Schools should contact local agencies that may be willing to come into the school to provide resources and support for students and their families. Additionally, schools should encourage engagement with the community and its resources by making their existence well-known and accessible.</p>

<p>After-school programs for newcomer youth were effective in increasing a sense of belonging at the school and community levels (Rodriguez, 2019; Pryce et al., 2019).</p>	<p>This district does not list any programs or partnerships specific to supporting newcomers.</p>	<p>I recommend that this district create an after-school program in the community for newcomers. Individual schools in this district should push for community partnerships to be able to address the diverse needs of their newcomers.</p>
<p>Mentoring programs focused on integrating newcomers into their community while affirming their own cultural identities led to an increased sense of belonging for newcomer youth (Pryce et al., 2019; Martin &amp; Suárez-Orozco, 2018).</p>	<p>This district does not offer mentoring programs for newcomer students.</p>	<p>Schools should consider a mentoring program for newcomer students to have a trusted individual guiding them at the school. The mentor should ideally have knowledge of the challenges faced by newcomers. It may be beneficial for past newcomers to become mentors too since they understand the experience and may share cultural or linguistic ties.</p>

**Mental Health Supports**

While the classroom-level supports focused on improving sense of belonging, the school-wide interventions focused more heavily on mental health interventions. The mental health supports provided at school are helpful in addressing the pre- and post-migration stressors many newcomer students face. Apart from the services that school counselors provide, there are strategies that teachers can implement in the classroom that support positive mental health outcomes. It is important for all stakeholders to be knowledgeable about the psychological and emotional stressors of the newcomer experience to increase positive outcomes both inside and outside of school.

**Table 3**

*Social Emotional Strategies*

<p>Research</p>	<p>Practice</p>	<p>Recommendation</p>
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<p>Of thirteen studies focusing on school-based social and emotional interventions, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) was most effective in reducing symptoms of PTSD for war-traumatized youth. Additionally, after training, CBT strategies could be delivered by teachers in the classroom. (Sullivan &amp; Simonson, 2016).</p>	<p>This district is not currently using CBT strategies for newcomers.</p>	<p>The counseling departments should focus on CBT strategies to help newcomer students work through their difficult experiences. Schools should also train other staff in CBT strategies so that they too can address the traumas affecting students in the classroom.</p>
<p>Providing newcomer students with access to psychologists to address their migration-related stressors reduced their behavior difficulties and improved their academic achievement (Bal &amp; Perzigian, 2013; Dearing et al., 2016).</p>	<p>This district does not list any mental health counseling services specific to newcomers.</p>	<p>Schools need to offer counseling services to newcomers aimed at addressing their migration stressors. Counselors should be trained in newcomer-specific challenges, how they manifest, and how to work through them.</p>
<p>Getting newcomer students to share their experiences both through verbal processing techniques with counselors and in conversations with their peers had the greatest impact on treating mental health challenges (Tyrer &amp; Fazel, 2014; Martin &amp; Suárez-Orozco, 2018).</p>	<p>This district is not currently using verbal processing interventions for newcomers.</p>	<p>Counselors working with refugee students should utilize verbal processing interventions to address their previous traumatic experiences that may be disrupting their transition and recovery. Teachers should cultivate a supportive and caring environment in order to reach the point of discussing personal backgrounds with peers.</p>

**Summary**

This action plan focused on the areas of support for newcomer students found in the research and analyzed how the school district reflected those recommendations. Though this specific district has publicly declared its support for newcomer students, there were no resources to be found at the district level. Surprisingly, using the search function on the district website yielded zero results when searching the term newcomer. The nonexistence of current practices

for newcomers at the district level was eye-opening to the dire need for support for newcomers and their families locally. The main takeaways from this research were the importance of creating a supportive learning community inside and outside of the classroom and using the knowledge of the newcomer experience to help students work through those challenges to be better suited for adapting to their new community.

In this section, I have looked at the three themes of my literature review, synthesized what the literature has said, described the findings from my district, and made recommendations for the district to reach best practices. I will now examine the literature more closely in the discussion section.

### **Discussion**

In this discussion section, I am first going to discuss the literature on the challenges faced by newcomer students and the strategies for combating these challenges at the classroom and school levels. The purpose of this project was to deepen my understanding of the newcomer experience in order to determine how to best support my students. In this research, I uncovered the range of issues experienced by newcomer students including immigration stresses, acculturation stresses, sense of belonging, discrimination, and more. While academic and linguistic challenges are major concerns for newcomer students, the research pointed towards the psychosocial challenges as needing the most attention. This culmination of research reflects the suggested practices for educators and administrators to address these issues and best support newcomer students. From my exploration of my chosen school district site, I discovered the limited avenues of support for students, and more shockingly, the nonexistence of any newcomer-specific supports at the district level. After discussing the literature and its

implications within the context of my site, I will also discuss the implications for educators, implications for future research, and the limitations of the project.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This section combines the findings from the literature and the practices I identified from my selected site which was a school district located in Western Washington. The focal questions guiding this project were: What are the specific challenges related to the adjustment of newcomer students at school according to the research? According to the research, what classroom practices have been effective in creating positive outcomes for newcomer students? According to the research, what school programs and procedures have been effective in creating positive outcomes for newcomer students? I will discuss the answers to these questions in the context of this school district as well as the trends found in the literature.

#### ***The Challenges for Newcomers Identified in the Research***

Some of the main concerns identified in the research were those related to the psychosocial well-being of newcomer students. My main goal was to find out the issues that were affecting the student outcomes, which I recognized as both the academic and social-emotional consequences for newcomer students. I first want to discuss the immigration-related challenges that affect all newcomer students to some degree. Moving schools for any student is a significant change but coupling that transition with a move to a new country is a major life event. Without even considering what these students and their families will encounter once they arrive in an unfamiliar country, there may have been traumatic events that will affect their transition. Similarly, the challenges related to the reasons for migrating do not end just because they are in a new place, but rather, post-migration presents its own sets of challenges. Families may experience a fear of deportation, separation from family members, and a lack of resources. In my

past student-teaching classroom, one of my students became emotional giving context to the stress he and his family had been experiencing trying to navigate living in a new country with limited resources. He described the difficulties he and his family faced to access basic necessities including food and clothing while processing the major event of immigrating. In addition to these stressors, he was struggling to manage an unfamiliar school system with the pressures to succeed and fit in. Apart from providing academic support to students, teachers and peers must find ways to support the social-emotional needs of their newcomer students. Educators and administrators must consider the pre-migration stressors these students face as they have a significant impact on psychosocial and academic outcomes (Patel et al., 2016).

For refugee students especially, exposure to war and other traumatic events led to negative outcomes requiring attention at school. In my own experience as a student teacher, I saw students become emotional during class as they thought of family members they left behind in a country at war. Topics in social studies and ELA brought up raw emotions about things they or their families had experienced. Researchers found that students who were exposed to war experienced more anxiety, conduct problems, and had lower academic achievement (Patel et al., 2017). While PTSD, anxiety, and depression related to these experiences need to be addressed by a psychologist or counselor, a sense of school belonging was associated with lower depression (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). School staff can ensure that the school and the people within the school present a welcoming and supportive environment.

If newcomer students are experiencing any mental health outcomes as a result of their migration experiences, school staff must point them to counseling services that are easily accessible to them. I found that my action site did not have specific resources in place, however, they did provide general counseling in schools. My recommendation is to incorporate

professional development and training specific to newcomers and their needs for all education staff. I did note that not all teachers or schools may be equipped to deal with the challenges that newcomer students present, especially in areas where historically there has not been a large immigrant population. However, the changing trends in immigration and climate surrounding immigration topics necessitate the attention of all stakeholders in newcomer students' lives.

The stress of immigrating itself puts strain on families, but the added acculturative family conflict can have a major impact on students as well (Patel et al., 2016). Even without the war exposure, newcomer students still experienced challenges including acculturation conflicts with themselves or their families. On top of experiencing a culture shock at school, students must navigate how much of this new culture to adopt or not adopt. If they adopt facets of the new culture, they may experience conflict with their families, but on the other hand, if they do not, they risk bullying from their peers. I saw my own newcomer students struggle with feeling between cultures at school versus at home, and oftentimes those cultural differences led to clashes. Teachers may expect their students to quickly adhere to the norms of the U.S. school system, oftentimes disregarding their own funds of knowledge. The culture of the U.S. school system requires an adjustment of its own, however, teachers can make sure to affirm students' existing identities and cultures to better merge the two. This can be done by incorporating students' funds of knowledge into lessons and asking students to share aspects of their culture. It is important to create a school and class environment that recognizes the benefits of diversity and celebrates it.

Instances of bullying and discrimination towards newcomers are unfortunately common and lead to outcomes of depressive symptoms, lower self-esteem, and a lower sense of belonging at school (Bayram Özdemir et al., 2021). While dealing with cultural clashes themselves and

with their families, newcomer students also experience ethnic victimization at the hands of their peers. Beyond the psychological effects, experiences of ethnic victimization led to an expectation of academic failure as well as low school satisfaction (Bayram Özdemir & Stattin, 2014). When students do not feel safe at school or like they are welcomed there, it negatively impacts their academic outcomes (Oxman-Martinez & Choi, 2014). Students should have an understanding of the newcomer experience to be mindful of the challenges some of their peers may be facing. Incorporating lessons in social-emotional learning can be useful in helping students develop empathy and creating an environment against bullying. Teachers must also address the negative stereotypes and social views held about immigrants in order to tackle biases that may arise in the classroom. Classroom communities cannot be built without intervening against the negative views towards immigrants.

Researchers consistently pointed to the school environment and sense of belonging at school as being important in student outcomes for newcomers (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Chiu et al., 2012). Creating a welcoming environment is key to aiding the integration of newcomer students as schools are typically the first point of contact as a resource for newcomer students. Similarly, this might be the first instance where they must grapple with a new dominant culture and have regular contact with those from outside their own culture. Newcomer students often have a lesser sense of belonging at school than their native peers and thus have challenges adapting to this environment (Chiu et al., 2012; Prior & Niesz, 2013). Building bridges between home and school for newcomers is just one way to help make them comfortable at school. Another helpful strategy for educators is to pair students of similar backgrounds whether they be newcomers themselves or share similar cultural ties. Newcomers need to develop a connection

with their peers and their teachers to increase their sense of belonging at school and in the community at large.

I found that schools often promote resources for their multilingual learners and their English language development, however, they fail to recognize the specific non-linguistic needs of their newcomer students. Though these students may need added educational support, especially those with interrupted educational backgrounds, what these students need most is social-emotional support. Feeling isolated both in the community and the classroom sets newcomer students up for failure. Those who work with newcomer students must do what they can to create an inviting environment that supports their integration into the host culture while still maintaining their existing cultural identities.

### ***Classroom Practices to Support Newcomers***

The second guiding question from the rationale was directed at the literature on classroom-level strategies for supporting newcomers. Newcomer students need to be in a supportive environment as they work through the challenges of integrating into a new host society. If students do not feel welcome at school, then there is no reason we should expect them to show up each day putting in their best effort. My school district did not advertise any specific practices they like to employ to welcome newcomer students, however, the district maintains its commitment to equity and inclusion. Stating a commitment to inclusion and acting on it are not the same and I would have liked to see specific ways they make sure their newcomers' needs are met. Students want to feel like their peers respect them and want to know more about them, and similarly, they want to feel supported by their teachers (Nakhaie et al., 2022). Without this support at school, they are less likely to persist academically. Teachers must work towards creating an environment that positively embraces newcomers and their assets. This can be done

through celebrations of different cultures, calling on students' funds of knowledge during discussions or work, and establishing a strong class community using social-emotional learning strategies.

Student-teacher relationships are important in any context, but especially so when students are new to the classroom and the community. More than ever, teachers of newcomer students need to present a welcoming environment that students feel like they are an active part of a community. Teachers can structure time for community building in their classrooms where they can learn more about each other and how to be a supportive team. Support from teachers can be both academic and emotional, as students want to feel like their teachers support them and believe in their success (Nakhaie et al., 2022). Students were more likely to participate in class when they perceived that there were people at school who cared about them and supported them (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009). Creating a classroom culture that emphasizes care for all students can positively impact students' emotional and academic outcomes. While considering linguistic challenges for students, teachers should strive to keep their newcomer students just as engaged and involved as their native peers. Including diverse perspectives in learning benefits their native peers and lets students know their identities are valued and welcomed. Drawing on students' background knowledge is just one way to encourage their participation while also learning more about them.

Peer support is a key piece in creating a welcoming class environment. Without an understanding of the experiences of refugee and immigrant students, native peers may not fully grasp what their newcomer peers may be experiencing. Providing students with the knowledge of the immigrant experience may help them to develop empathy for their peers and lead to positive caring relationships. Additionally, teachers should involve their students in learning prejudice

reduction strategies as newcomer students may be hesitant to trust in their new classroom community due to past experiences of discrimination (Roxas, 2011). Students should not aim for the assimilation of their newcomer peers; instead, they should seek to learn more about their experiences and identities. Promoting a classroom that celebrates diversity can help create a foundation of mutual respect. Peers should ideally have a mindset of promoting integration and adding to one's existing culture, not erasing their own culture in order to assimilate. Though newcomer students may naturally gravitate towards students of similar backgrounds to their own, teachers should attempt to create opportunities for interethnic relationships to be formed (Barrett et al., 2012). Similarly, pushing for teamwork and collaboration in the classroom can provide opportunities for peers to open up to one another and provide emotional support in ways that adults at schools may not be able to.

### ***School and Community Practices to Support Newcomers***

The third question from the rationale inquired about the practices for supporting newcomers at the school and community levels. The literature emphasized that integrating newcomers and supporting their needs was a team effort requiring the collaboration of multiple stakeholders including counselors and outside community members. My school site did not have any newcomer-specific programs or resources for integrating newcomers. Schools should implement professional development focused on ways to draw on the community to ensure all students' needs are met. While integration is the main goal, programs and experiences that work against assimilationist approaches are important for maintaining newcomers' cultural values and identities. Finding a safe space for students to connect outside of the classroom alleviates some of the pressures of the English language and the demands of the classroom. After-school programs focused on promoting integration and connecting newcomers can help students form

relationships, thus aiding the adjustment to their new community. Though not all schools have the resources for after-school programs, finding ways for newcomer students to connect with one another can be beneficial to their adjustment.

Mentoring programs can help create a sense of belonging for newcomer students as they provide students with a safe space to learn more about their community and connect with others. Having someone to guide newcomers through this transition in their lives can be beneficial considering relocating to a new country can be an isolating experience. Mentees should have an awareness of the challenges faced by newcomer students and should affirm their identities while still aiding their integration. I recommend that if students cannot have a peer mentor there is at least another adult with extensive knowledge of the newcomer experience there to support them.

Rather than pointing newcomer families to external resources, it can be beneficial to bring those resources to the school. Members of local nonprofit agencies or specialized counselors may be better utilized if they are readily accessible at the school. This can help bridge the gap between the community and newcomers, as well as give students easy access to resources. In my own experience, I saw my newcomer students struggle with resource insecurities which affected their day-to-day inside the classroom. At my past school, we had someone dedicated to connecting students and their families with resources. My findings from my action site uncovered online resources that are at the discretion of the families to access, and none were specific to supporting recent immigrants. If schools are unable to provide programs themselves, they can rely on community resources like libraries and nonprofits.

The integration of newcomers is an ongoing process that benefits from the contributions of many. Having people who have shared similar experiences or have worked directly with newcomer communities greatly aids this challenging time in many people's lives. Sometimes the

struggles that these newcomer students experience exceed the capabilities and scope of educators' roles. Students facing the traumas of their immigration experience often will require the intervention of school counselors. Strategies including cognitive behavioral therapy and verbal processing interventions are effective in helping these students reduce their symptoms of PTSD and depression (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). Beyond helping these students learn to process their experiences in a healthy manner, treating their mental health challenges led to higher academic achievement for newcomer students (Dearing et al., 2016).

### ***Trends in the Research***

When considering how to support the integration of newcomers, it is important to acknowledge the existence of harmful biases towards the immigrant population which can negatively affect their outcomes. On top of the detrimental psychosocial effects that biases and discrimination cause, these harmful views can damage students' self-perception and cultural identity expression. Schools must take the necessary steps to protect their newcomer students. A trend I noticed within the literature was the importance of multicultural and culturally responsive pedagogies when working with diverse learner populations. A multicultural approach to education incorporates students' identities and experiences into learning in a way that values the diversity of all learners (Gay, 2000). On the other hand, culturally responsive teaching strategies push back against biases and are asset-based (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teachers utilizing culturally responsive strategies must reflect on their own group memberships and the biases that they may hold as a result, as mentioned in the research by Turner and Brown (2008). These researchers implemented an intervention program focused on educating peers about the refugee experience to better integrate newcomers and noted that existing biases from teachers and peers affected the reception of newcomers. In this specific study, researchers promoted a multicultural

approach in classrooms due to the non-newcomer students' preference for separation from their refugee peers. This intervention had native students reflect on their existing attitudes and taught them about the challenges and experiences of refugees, which ultimately led to a preference for integration. Students' attitudes towards newcomers in this context were also representative of their views on assimilation versus acculturation. Acculturation rather than assimilation maintains and adds to students' existing cultural identities rather than losing them to the dominant culture. For many newcomer students, managing the culture shock of a new country while balancing their own culture leads to a more challenging transition (Patel et al., 2016; Patel et al., 2017; Bayram Özdemir et al., 2021). Multicultural and culturally responsive methods can help to ease acculturative stressors for newcomers by affirming their identities and working to undo the harmful perceptions of those around them. Part of creating a welcoming and supportive classroom environment is ensuring that students' differences are respected and acknowledged in a positive light, which can help combat ethnic harassment and a lower sense of belonging for newcomer students. Similarly, promoting additive mindsets at schools can increase a sense of belonging for newcomers and their families by creating opportunities for family engagement that recognize their funds of knowledge.

### **Implications for Educators**

Creating a welcoming school environment is the goal for any classroom, however, this perception holds more weight for newcomer students who may be feeling truly out of place in a new school in a new country. Teachers should focus on community building at the start of the year to establish a safe environment for students to open up and build relationships. Creating solid routines and involving students in setting expectations at the beginning of the year are just two ways researchers saw safe environments built for newcomers (Hos, 2016; Roxas, 2011).

When encouraging newcomer students to share more about their backgrounds and experiences, teachers must consider the potential traumas they face. While immigrating is a major event in any child's life, experiences specific to refugees may require additional interventions. Schools and teachers should aim to be aware of the context of their newcomer students' experiences; however, the legal considerations of immigration may prevent this information from being shared. In this case, teachers and peers need to pick up on anything being shared that might warrant further intervention. Schools should have counselors available for students or educate other staff in trauma-informed practices to address the issues affecting students in the classroom.

Educators should recognize and celebrate diversity in their classrooms so as not to make newcomer students feel more out of place than they may already. Adding diverse perspectives into learning can help affirm students' identities while recognizing the background knowledge they contribute to the learning environment. By drawing on students' cultural funds of knowledge, teachers may gain opportunities to learn more about their experiences and interests to further promote their involvement in the classroom. Similarly, involving the parents of newcomers in ways that acknowledge their funds of knowledge can go far in creating the sentiment that immigrants and their contributions are valued. Keeping parents involved in their children's education can help ease the integration process for entire families as well. Ongoing collaboration with families can engage them with the community and create open communication about areas of need and resources to aid them.

Culturally responsive practices help counter the post-migration acculturative stressors that newcomers face by representing and respecting student differences. These practices can help peers of newcomers become more empathetic and teach them the skills to form relationships with people of differing identities. To help students maintain their cultural identities, teachers

should promote multiculturalism in the classroom. Teachers and peers should help newcomer students adapt to the cultural environment of their new school while still keeping their cultural and social contexts in mind. Educators should foster positive relationships with each of their students and encourage peer collaboration that promotes cultural awareness. Exploring the benefits of diversity can help build students' self-esteem and create a sense of community. Social emotional learning and anti-discrimination education to teach about refugee and newcomer experiences can help set the foundation for positive interethnic relationships among peers.

Teachers should call on outside resources as much as possible to help support the varying needs of newcomer students. After-school programs that connect newcomers, mentorship programs at school, and community partnerships are all ways to tackle the challenges they face and support their integration. Providing community resources at school sites can help ease some of the burdens of the immigration process and get families involved with the community. The collaboration of stakeholders at all levels can help the newcomer experience be less isolating.

### **Implications for Future Research**

In both my research for the action plan and review of the literature, I found that the focus lies on the linguistic deficits of newcomer students. It was difficult to find literature that did not discuss the linguistic challenges for newcomers to some degree. Though this is a considerable area of concern for educators, focusing on language deficits neglects the complex challenges that many of these students face. I am interested to see how the change in social views of immigration over time in the U.S. has impacted or will continue to impact newcomer students. Although I found one study addressing this matter, I am curious to see how the trends in this research may be affected by a more recent anti-immigration climate in the U.S., specifically, how teacher and native peer attitudes have affected students recently. On the topic of trends over

time, I am also interested in how the needs and difficulties of newcomers have changed across generations. I was first inspired to research this topic based on the challenging newcomer experiences of my own family and family members of friends. Additionally, I had hoped to find more qualitative research to gain a better understanding of these issues from the student's perspective, but these studies often exceeded the grade range I was searching for.

### **Limitations**

The publication dates for the research I included ranged in year from 2007 through 2022. I had originally hoped to keep the data within the U.S.; however, the limited findings specific to the U.S. prevented me from doing so. The search criteria I used were the terms newcomer, refugee, immigrant, and recent immigrant. As I gathered research, I found that using the term newcomer did not yield many results, so I used a more general term of immigrant, but that data would often include non-newcomer students. The specific term refugee provided me with newcomer data but was a category I had not anticipated differentiating at the start of this project. I aimed to keep the focus of this research on newcomers in the elementary and middle school grades, however, since I included international research, the middle school criteria varied and included students up to fifteen years of age. Similarly, the term newcomer has varying definitions of how long is considered a newcomer, so I expanded the criteria to include students who had immigrated more than three years prior.

One major challenge I encountered while completing this project was not being at a job site when completing the action plan. This affected the richness of what I could provide as I was relying only on information that was available online.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have reviewed the research on the challenges faced by newcomer students and how to best support them through classroom and school-wide practices. Washington state's immigrant population grew by 29% between 2010 and 2021 and in this time, Washington became sixth in the country for receiving the most refugees. The increasing population of newcomers requires the support of multiple stakeholders in schools to increase the positive outcomes for this vulnerable population. After receiving my English Language Learner endorsement, it was my goal to determine the non-linguistic issues that need to be addressed for newcomer students. Based on my experiences and the research into my school district, schools are not providing newcomer-specific support. Schools must support the social-emotional needs of their newcomer students just as much as their academic needs. In addressing pre- and post-migration stressors for newcomers, teachers will be aiding their integration into the school and community at large.

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