

**Metropolis Prairie Centre
University of Saskatchewan**

**The influence of family on refugee and immigrant children's cultural
adjustment: Can school intervene in this process?**

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Executive Summary

The text of the full report can be read at the Prairie Metropolis Center website at <http://www.pcerii.metropolis.net/> or requested from the first author by emailing him at v.chirkov@usask.ca

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Abstract

This report presents the results of the interviews of 27 ESL teachers, school administrators and social workers together with the interviews of 104 immigrant parents and 70 of their children about their individual perspectives on the process of immigrant and refugee adjustment in Saskatoon, SK. Several groups of factors related to the ESL students' adaptation were extracted from the teachers' and administrators' interviews. These factors complement each other and justify improving the organization of ESL training and multicultural education. Interviews with immigrant parents revealed the role of such factors as motivation for immigration, expectations about their life in Canada, expectations about their children's future, life satisfaction and health. Religiosity and ethnic and Canadian identities were also analysed. It was revealed that immigrant and refugee children's adjustment related not only to their own identities, school integration and English skills, but also associated with their parents' motivation for migration and their parents' well-being. Implementations for the policies are suggested.

Executive summary

What did we intend to study?

This two-year grant (2005-2007) had the following objectives:

1. To investigate the perception ESL teachers, school administrators and social workers had regarding the problems that ESL students (immigrant and refugee children) encounter during their adaptation to life in Canada;
2. To study the attitudes and opinions of parents regarding various aspects of their immigration and of their children's adaptation to Canada;
3. To study the attitudes and opinions of children about immigration, schooling, their relations with parents, and their adjustment to a new life;
4. To analyse the historical roots of the immigration of the different ethnic groups included into the study; to describe the cultural background of family relations, gender and parenting roles, the role of education, etc. in these groups.

What did we do to achieve our goals?

Participants and Methods

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 ESL teachers from the Catholic and Public School divisions, Saskatoon, SK, 7 vice-principles from the same schools and 3 social workers from the Saskatoon Open Door Society.

Then we conducted structured interviews with immigrant families. We talked separately with fathers, mothers and their children. We interviewed 78 families: 23 families from China; 7 families from South Asia; 15 families from the Middle East: 4 families from Afghanistan; 8 families from Iran, 1 family from Iraq and 2 families from Syria, 7 families from South America (Colombians and Argentineans) and 7 families from Eastern Europe, including Romanians, Russians, and Ukrainians.. From Africa we interviewed 7 full families and 12 unattended children who immigrated to Canada alone; overall, we interviewed 174 people: 104 adults and 70 children. The interviews were conducted by trained interviewers who were of the same ethnic background as the participants and who spoke the participants' native language.

In addition to the standard demographic questions, the parents were asked about: motivation for immigration, including their level of self-determination and goals for migrating; expectations about life in Canada; psychological well-being; ethnic and Canadian identities; socio-economic status both in their home country and in Canada; language proficiency;

religiosity; social capital, and expectations about their children, their acculturation, education and future careers.

The children's interviews were structured around the following topics: English proficiency, ESL training and the usefulness of it; native language retention and ethnic behaviors; usage of the English language and Canadian behaviors; ethnic and Canadian identities; social capital and network of emotional support; family arguments; family relations harmony; psychological well-being; attitudes toward education and academic motivation; daily hassles at school and their emotional intensity; school integration, and support from teachers. In addition, the interviewers were advised to rate their impression of the interviewees, both the parents and the children, and the relationships between them.

How did we analyse our data?

Data analysis of the teachers' interviews

We extracted from the transcribed interviews various statements related to the education, behavior, and adaptation of ESL students. We selected about 600 statements which were organized around several topics with sub-categories. Then we calculated the overall frequencies of these topics and categories for the sample, for different school divisions, and for teachers and administrators separately.

Data analysis of the parents' and children's interviews

Our participants were divided into 6 geographical/cultural groups: China, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, South America and Eastern Europe. We started our analysis by providing short economic, political and cultural analyses of each group including a brief history of the immigration from this geographical region to Canada and the current immigration trends. We then provided a description of the basic cultural values and practices that regulate family relations, parenting, schooling and other domains of life in these countries. The interviews' data, both quantitative and open-ended answered, were entered into the SPSS program. The parents' data were matched with their children's data. The summary scores for each variable identified above were calculated. Then the means and standard deviations for these scores were calculated; this constituted the mean-level analysis for each sub-sample. Then we conducted correlational analysis within each sub-sample. We looked at the associations among the parental variables, among the children variables and between the parental and children variables. Finally these data, means and correlations were combined to provide a relatively holistic picture of each ethnic

group interviewed. These summary analyses were contextualized within the cultural analysis of each group, and overall conclusions about the adaptations of children from different ethnic groups were drawn.

What were our main results and what conclusions did we draw from them?

The main results and implementations for the policy were:

1. One of the main motives immigrants and refugees have to come to Canada is to provide better living conditions and opportunities for their children's education and future careers. That is why parents' satisfaction with the quality of their children's education is an important factor in making their decision to stay in the province or to move to another province or even out of the country. Another extremely important factor is parents' employment.

2. Many parents are not satisfied with the quality of their children's education and they complain about various aspects of it. As our analysis showed, this discontent is mostly based on their lack of understanding the philosophy of Canadian education, which is based on the values of equality, respect for students' freedom, tolerance, anti-authoritarianism, support for the development of individuality and personal identity. Parents need a very clear understanding of these values in order to accept them.

On the other hand, many demands of immigrant parents, who have had an opportunity to compare different systems of education, could help improve Canadian education. Among others, the following factors could be mentioned: increase the quality of subject teachers; reduce the use of badly-copied and often blind hand-outs in favour of textbooks and manuals; have a more structured system of homework assignments, which is clear to parents and students; increase the role of high academic achievements and achievement motivation in students' learning motivation. With regard to the last factor, here is the opinion of one Chinese parent: *"In school, they are constantly complimented, and do not achieve their true potentials. Children feel satisfied with their work and they do not strive harder to be even better."* And this is what a young Canadian-born white male commented after reading this report: *"If you ask me, this is a great flaw of the Canadian school system."*

3. The quality of education in general, and the ESL training specifically, should be a priority not only for the education community but to the Provincial Immigration Policies as the friendliness of local schools and communities and the quality of education may become a powerful factor in attracting and retaining immigrants in the province.

4. Whereas ESL teachers themselves are very enthusiastic about their work, there are many organizational and technical obstacles that must be overcome before making Saskatoon schools the most attractive schools for immigrants arriving in Canada. ESL training is often mixed with cultural education, life preparation, homework assistance and main subject tutoring. As a result of this, the progress of learning English skills is slow, and consequently, students do not quickly progress in their general education; ESL training should be very focused and language oriented, and some teachers even suggested having only ESL classes for the first half-year of new students' admissions; there is a high demand for the ESL programs for illiterate students and/or ESL student with little educational experience as well as for the 18-22 years old students with limited educational experience. Special attention should be directed toward assessing the skills and knowledge of incoming student together with their learning abilities/disabilities and other symptoms of psychopathology; more technical equipment is needed: computers, software, manuals; teaching assistants and more ESL teachers are required.

5. Cultural sensitivity and tolerance training would be good for both Canadian and ESL students. These could be 1.5-hour 'talk in a circle' meetings every week each semester. Each session could be filled with specially designed exercises that address the difficulties experienced by the newcomers to Canada, the sources of cultural misunderstanding, the detrimental and destructive role of prejudice and discrimination, the role of ethnic identity in people's functioning, etc. These sessions may also include ESL students' stories about their immigration and refuge and sharing their experiences about the expectations and difficulties of adjusting to life in Canada. Programs for such training (for both adults and students) that have been developed by cross-cultural researchers in The Netherlands (Logger, Paulsen, & Rothfusz, 2006) and Russia (Lebedeva, Luneva, & Stefanenko, 2004; Lebedeva, Luneva, Stefanenko, & Martynova, 2003) could easily be adapted to the Canadian context. Some of these trainings could be conducted together with the teachers, both ESL and subject. They may learn there at least such a minor thing, but mentioned by almost all ESL students, as the correct pronunciation of ESL students' names.

5. Parents need well-articulated information about Saskatoon schools: their education philosophy, mission and values; organizational requirements: scheduling, attendance, transportation, clothing, homework requirements, parent-teachers interviews etc. It is preferable

that this information is presented in their native languages. Similar pamphlets should be prepared for the immigrant students.

6. Parents also need several training sessions to discuss their expectations about their children's education, teachers' roles, and school administrators' duties. The training of cultural competence and parent-children relations in a new country could also be very helpful.

7. The needs of the families should be addressed depending on their members' SES, immigrant and employment status, motivation for immigration and some other parameters. Children's adjustment depends strongly on these factors and their parents' conditions.

What can we say about the ethnic groups that we studied?

Conclusion on China families' adaptation

This group of Chinese immigrants represents a new trend in immigration from China. Before, poor and ill-educated immigrants tried to escape harsh conditions in their home countries; but now, wealthy and well-educated middle class representatives exercise their right to search for even better lives than they had back home. Their mobility, agency and expectations are high and have to be met to the full extent in order for them to stay and be satisfied. They have diverse motivation to come to Canada, but it is mostly looking for advantages and not poverty escaping. The greatest barrier for Chinese immigrants' adaptation is their low level of English language proficiency. They have high concerns about the quality of education for their children.

Conclusion on South Asian families' adaptation

Our sample of South Asians is one of the most successful and satisfied immigrant groups: the parents are employed and wealthy; the children are well-adjusted and happy here. The major concern for these immigrants is the quality of their children's education. Some of them are so concerned about this that they even consider going back to India. In general, the South Asian sample is similar to the Chinese sample with regard to its motivation and general expectations. The advantage this group has is that they have a much better knowledge of English in comparison to the Chinese immigrants and a better employment situation. Both of these groups represent a new trend in the immigration from these two countries.

Conclusion on Muslim families' adaptation:

This is one of the most diverse samples in our study. It includes low-educated refugees who were trying to escape dangerous conditions in their home country together with highly-educated professionals who were looking for better opportunities for themselves and their

children. One of the biggest obstacles for them and their children is their lack of English skills. As our data demonstrate, most of the Middle Eastern children require attention: they have many psycho-somatic symptoms, they are not very happy, and they have problems at school. This group of immigrant and refugee children probably needs special programs to help them with their adjustment. It is important to mention that it was very difficult to get access to the Muslim community to invite them to participate in our research. Many participants who were contacted refused to participate. The closed nature of this community may create additional obstacles in discovering some of the deep problems with the adaptation of its members. The establishment of a special Committee to help the adaptation of Muslim immigrants could be suggested. This Committee should include immigration officials, social workers, educators and, very importantly, respected members of the Muslim community who could bridge the gap of communication with its members. This community should be the priority for immigrant assisting organizations and educators.

Conclusion on the African families' adaptation

Our results suggest that the African children, together with the Middle Asian children, should be a priority for the immigrant-assisting organization and educators. Both these groups reported the highest number of psychosomatic symptoms, arguments with their families and problems at school. Special attention is required to the unattended children and the children with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Culturally sensitive psychological counselling and psychotherapy, support groups, cultural competence and cultural tolerance trainings would be helpful additions to the acculturation of the children from these groups. The organization of Immigrant Youth support groups could be helpful also. For the African children their perception of the usefulness of the ESL classes plays an important role in their school adjustment. A special attention to the African children's ESL training is required. Ethnic identity is very important to the African children, and they should be helped in balancing it with their new Canadian reality. More extensive interviews with these children could help in developing new forms of their support and help.

Conclusion on the South American families' adaptation:

This group of immigrants is diverse and relatively complex with regard to their expectations and acculturation dynamics. They have the features of all previously-presented groups: lowly-educated parents together with more educated family members, and a great

diversity of wealth and occupations. The children exhibit the famous South American temperament and love of life, which may also mask some dangerous tendencies for domination or criminal activity (Personal observations of the interviewers). Our impression is that this group of immigrants and their children require closer attention of the immigrant-assisting organization and academic researchers. Further surveys and interviews with South American immigrants in Saskatchewan are required.

Conclusion on the East European families' adaptation

Most of the participants interviewed are well-employed and relatively well-to-do immigrants. They escaped from the anarchy of the post-Soviet disintegration and were in search of better opportunities for themselves and their children. The main complaint of this group is about school and the quality of their children's education. This is the least religious and most highly educated of the groups of immigrants. The children are mostly bicultural with more orientation toward Canadian identification. The parents from this group hold very controversial memories about their past life in Russia and have a variety of expectations about life in Canada, and some of these contradictions may hinder their adjustment. This group is also interesting as it was very difficult to recruit participants to this study, regardless of the fact that the PI himself is a member of this community. (It is possible, that this very fact could have prevented some families in participating in the study). More studies are required with this community.