

The Education and Integration of Immigrant Children in Ontario: A Content Analysis of Policy Documents Guiding Schools' Response to the Needs of Immigrant Students

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Abstract

Given the rise and diversification of the immigrant student population within Canadian school systems, the establishment of policies that support immigrant pupils' transition and integration has become of pressing concern for policymakers. Following our multi-dimensional support model, this study examined the extent to which Ontario's provincial education policies, guidelines, and strategies respond to the needs of immigrant students within the K-12 public education system. For the most part, the current analysis indicated that the ministry has established the necessary educational support measures to integrate immigrant students. However, our findings also suggest that this group of students warrants a stand-alone policy document to comprehensively address all of their unique needs. Moreover, this study underscores the importance of greater policy coherence and direction within Ontario, as well as the ongoing role that evidenced-based research should serve in the development and refinement of existing policies.

Keywords: immigrant children, integration policies, inclusive education

Introduction

A total of 7,540,825 immigrants live in Canada, representing 21.9 per cent of the population. This percentage has been gradually increasing throughout the past 20 years and is expected to increase to 28.2 per cent by 2036 (Statistics Canada, 2017c). The most recent 2016 Canadian Census indicated that almost 2.2 million children under the age of 15 are foreign-born (first generation) or have at least one foreign-born parent (second generation), representing 37.5 per cent of all Canadian children (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Collectively, these figures suggest that a substantial number of immigrant children are currently enrolled in Canadian elementary, middle, or secondary schools and that this number is likely going to increase in the coming years. This growing population represents both opportunities and challenges for provincial education systems—particularly Ontario, which is widely recognized for its cultural diversity.

As the immigrant student population in Canadian schools continues to grow and diversify, it is important that policymakers and school authorities establish coherent policy frameworks that successfully integrate immigrant students within school systems. The development of immigrant-friendly policies is not only important in order to achieve positive outcomes for immigrant students, but also to promote their integration within society at large, since their success can have profound social and economic implications for the future (Volante, Klinger, Bilgili, & Siegel, 2017a). Thus, the integration of immigrant students has both educational and social/economic consequences for provincial and national jurisdictions.

While many education systems strive to provide equal educational opportunities for all students—regardless of their immigration status, socioeconomic background, and origin—only a few manage to meet these objectives (Schleicher & Zoido, 2016). The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which evaluates education systems around the world by measuring 15-year-old school pupils' scholastic performance on mathematics, science, and reading literacy, has been widely used by researchers and policymakers to assess performance gaps between different segments of the student population, including immigrant student groups (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018; Volante, Klinger, Bilgili, & Siegel, 2017b). PISA scores show that in the majority of OECD countries, first-generation immigrant students perform significantly lower than their second-generation counterparts, who in turn perform lower than non-immigrant students (OECD, 2015).

Nevertheless, Canada has not only consistently ranked as a top performer on PISA, but results show that immigrant students tend to perform as well as non-immigrant students (OECD, 2015). Considering Canada has the second largest share of the percentage of first- and second-generation immigrant students among all OECD countries at 29.6 per cent (Huddleston, Bilgili, Joki, & Vankova, 2015), it is essential to understand how education systems across Canada are continually supporting and facilitating immigrant students' success and integration within school systems. Although Ontario's immigrant results have been fairly positive to date, these outcomes can change fairly rapidly and underscore the need to continually monitor policies and practices to ensure continued success for this vulnerable student population (Volante et al., 2017a). Through an in-depth analysis of existing policies, procedures and strategies established by Ontario's Ministry of Education (MOE), this research will examine the educational support measures being provided to immigrant students to address their unique needs. In doing so, we seek to identify any potential gaps and considerations to inform future policy development efforts within and outside Ontario.

Addressing the Challenges Experienced by Immigrant Students

Immigrant children come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, which in turn impact the nature and scope of challenges they experience within schools (Volante et al., 2017b). Moreover, as noted by Kaprielian-Churchill (1996), "it is not only a matter of students adjusting to Canadian society and to each other, it is also a question of boards and education ministries adapting to the changing conditions and composition of the schools" (p. 360). Hence, it is important that governments, districts, and schools establish and continually monitor and update policies, procedures, programs, and services that reflect the learning, language, social, cultural, psychological and emotional needs of their student population in relation to the available research evidence.

School System and English Language Learners

Studies consistently suggest that immigrant students with limited English proficiency experience lower levels of educational achievement and attainment (Areepattamannil & Berinderjeet, 2013; Fuligni, 1997; Warren, 1996). Moreover, children who speak a different language at home other than the language of instruction are at a further disadvantage (OECD, 2004). For this reason, many schools focus on the provision of language support programs for immigrant students in order to facilitate their integration within regular programmes (Gaytan, Carhill, & Suarez-Orozco, 2007). Nevertheless, it is equally important for policymakers and school authorities to address the non-linguistic needs of immigrant students and their families through the development of policies that target various social, cultural, and economic needs (Sidhu & Taylor, 2007; Yoon, 2012).

It is also important to take into consideration certain school characteristics and approaches that may also have a significant impact on integration outcomes. For instance, tracking systems and testing mechanisms can severely disadvantage this group of students (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2016; Malamud & Pop-Eleches, 2011; Parker, 2008; Rong, Thorstensson, & Hilburn, 2011). School systems that have adopted an early tracking system, where children are placed in a specific program and/or school type based on their abilities at a relatively young age, often increase inequity among disadvantaged students, particularly those with an immigrant background (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2016; Malamud & Pop-Eleches, 2011; Parker, 2008; Rong et al., 2011; Volante, Klinger, & Bilgili, 2018). Under these systems, immigrant students are not given enough time to develop the level of knowledge and skills that their non-immigrant peers have developed, which results in immigrant students being placed in lower academic tracks (Bilgili, Hud-

dleston, & Joki, 2015; Crul & Holdaway, 2009; Malamud & Pop-Eleches, 2011; Volante et al., 2018). Rather, schools that adopt a comprehensive system, where tracking is delayed, are more advantageous for immigrant children as they are given additional time to catch up to their peers (Bilgili et al., 2015; Murat & Frederic, 2015).

Social and Cultural Accommodations

Newly arrived immigrant students experience diverse integration problems that go beyond language deficiency (Spomer & Cowen, 2001). For many immigrant students, their unfamiliarity with a formal school system, as well as adapting to a new culture, can result in feelings of isolation and social exclusion (Ron-Balsera, 2015; Spomer & Cowen, 2001). For this reason, schools should strive to develop not only immigrant students' language skills, but also facilitate social interactions as a means to develop their social skills (Pottie, Dahal, Georgiades, Premji, & Hassan, 2015; Ron-Balsera, 2015; Spomer & Cowen, 2001).

Additionally, although educational policy discourses have primarily focused on promoting cultural diversity in schools, studies have shown that schools and teachers tend to practice culture neutral education, whereby teachers' instruction and assessment methods are not culturally responsive (Bayles, 2009; Mahon, 2006; Strelakova-Hughes, 2017; Volante, Klinger, Siegel & Yahia, 2019). While teachers might be aware of different cultures and beliefs in their classrooms, they often try to minimize cultural differences between students and "apply universal values and principles to their educational practices" (Bayles, 2009, p. 110). Despite teachers' best intentions, the degree to which a teaching style is ethnocentric as opposed to multicultural, as well as the lack of cultural self-awareness and response to difference, can promote negative attitudes that can lead to wider achievement gaps and discrimination among immigrant students (Mahon, 2006; McFadden, Merryfield, & Barron, 1997). When immigrant students are not provided the required support to participate under the system, they are prone to develop silent anxiety, difficulties participating in class, and withdrawal problems (Spomer & Cowen, 2001). Hence, the establishment of an inclusive learning environment and intercultural policies that are considerate of immigrant students is crucial in order to address their social and cultural accommodation needs (Areepattamannil & Berinderjeet, 2013; Coady, Hamann, Harrington, Paceco, Pho, & Yedlin, 2003; Goodwin, 2002; Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Mahon, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999).

Bullying and Psychological Well-Being

Unfortunately, studies have indicated that immigrant students are particularly susceptible to *immigrant bullying*, which involves discrimination on the basis of immigration status, race, colour, ethnicity, religion and other identity factors (Crul & Holdaway, 2009; Pottie et al., 2015; Ron-Balsera, 2015; UNESCO, 2017). This form of discrimination can have significant negative effects on children's mental health (Ron-Balsera, 2015; Spomer & Cowen, 2001). Moreover, studies have shown that, although many immigrant children and youth require emotional or psychological support, a large proportion of these children do not seek the help that they need because of different factors, including their poor understanding of mental health treatment approaches, stigma surrounding mental health, or simply transportation difficulties. (McKenzie, Agic, Tuck, & Antwi, 2016; Mellin, Taylor, & Weist, 2013; Zwaanswijk, Van Der Ende, Verhaak, Bensing, & Verhulst, 2003; Weist and Christodulu, 2000).

In light of the potential development of mental health problems among immigrant students, it is important that compulsory schools step in to ensure children are receiving appropriate care. Research has highlighted the importance of providing mental health services in schools by creating partnerships with community mental health centers, health departments, and other social services (Ballard, Sander, & Klimes-Dougan, 2014; Mellin et al., 2013; Weist and Christodulu, 2000; Weist, Goldstein, Morris, & Bryant, 2003). This approach allows schools to be responsive and provide early intervention services that ensure students receive the care that they need (Ballard et al., 2014; Mellin et al., 2013; Weist and Christodulu, 2000; Weist et al., 2003).

Socioeconomic Status

The socioeconomic status (SES) of children can severely impact their educational achievement, as well as their access to opportunities and resources in the future (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2009; Marques, Rosa, & Martins, 2007; OECD, 2011; Ron-Balsera, 2015; Schleicher & Zoido, 2016; Schnepf, 2007). Im-

migrant students from low SES groups often underperform compared to immigrant students and non-immigrant students from higher SES groups around the world (Marques et al., 2007; OECD, 2011; Volante, 2016). An OECD report found that in nearly all OECD countries, economic disadvantages faced by immigrant children are often correlated with their parents' work status (Whiteford & Adema, 2007). Therefore, the resources that families have to support their children's education are also important when considering their level of integration. Resources encompass both parental education levels as well as the financial status of families. For example, research shows that parents with low education levels may lack the ability to help their children with academic activities at home or navigate the school system (Areepattamannil & Berinderjeet, 2013; Bilgili et al., 2015; Crul & Holdaway, 2009).

Similarly, low financial resources often correlate with immigrant families settling in low socioeconomic neighbourhoods that are often ethnically segregated (Crul & Holdaway, 2009). Schools in low socioeconomic neighbourhoods are often disadvantaged, which can increase the possibility of educational segregation and low quality education due to the lack of resources and funding for the establishment of programs and services required by immigrant student groups (Areepattamannil & Berinderjeet, 2013; Schleicher & Zoido, 2016; Schnepf, 2007; Strelakova-Hughes, 2017). Interestingly, research suggests that the disadvantages of SES does not impact immigrant students equally across countries—underscoring the importance of policies to address and moderate the disadvantages faced by children from low SES groups (Entorf & Lauk, 2008; Schnepf, 2007).

Multi-Dimensional Support Model

The operational definition of what integration of immigrants entails continues to be a concept debated by scholars and policymakers, since there is no “single, generally accepted definition, theory or model of immigrant integration” (Castles, Korac, Vasta, & Vertovec, 2001, p. 12). Nevertheless, scholars have established frameworks that provide a broader understanding of what constitutes “successful integration” under key areas of activity in the public arena, including employment, housing, health and education (Ager & Strang, 2008). For this study, we have drawn on several models that address the successful integration of immigrant children within school systems identified in the available literature. In particular, we have utilized the *Comprehensive Support Model* (European Commission, 2013) to help shape our *Multi-Dimensional Support Model*. This model encompasses specific policy measures/actions that address the needs of immigrant students under four educational support dimensions: 1) linguistic support; 2) academic support; 3) parental involvement; and 4) intercultural education and child-friendly learning environments. Table 1 highlights the specific policy measures/actions that could be adopted by governments and school systems in order to promote the integration of immigrant children within schools.

Table 1

General Diversity of Policy Measures at School According to their Thematic Focus

Educational Support Measure	Policy Measures/Actions
Linguistic Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment of the host language knowledge level • Intensive teaching of the language of instruction (integrated and separate models) • Transitional classes • Language training after school • Early (pre-school) language learning • Training teachers to teach the host language as a second language • Mother tongue instruction

Educational Support Measure	Policy Measures/Actions
Academic Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determining the adequate level of schooling • Reception measures • Induction programmes • Bilingual education • Addressing the learning needs in specific areas of the curriculum • Targeted support in the form of quotas, scholarships and grants to migrants and schools • Bridging schools • Mentors, tutors, bilingual teaching assistants • Help with homework; after-school facilities (e.g. day centres) • Re-integration programmes for early school leavers
Parental Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensitively understanding the idea of “involvement” • Publications on the school system in the mother tongue of immigrants • Providing adequate information through various communication channels • Use of interpreters • Staff responsible for the reception and orientation of immigrant pupils • Assisting immigrant families to make an informed decision on school choice
Intercultural Education and Friendly Learning Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher training for diversity • Training of staff to support immigrant pupils: language teachers, tutors, teachers of the host country’s language as a foreign language • Employing teachers from migrant backgrounds • Integrating cultural diversity in the curriculum • Teaching the heritage language • Elaboration of didactic instruments and materials to improve intercultural education • Mentors from immigrant backgrounds • Arrangements to celebrate non-Christian holidays and culturally sensitive dress codes

Source: (European Commission, 2013)

In order to make our *Multi-Dimensional Support Model* more comprehensive, we have added two additional educational support dimensions that closely align with emerging evidence and empirical research literature regarding the importance of psychosocial and socioeconomic needs of immigrant students (Volante et al., 2018). This information is noteworthy as immigrant children are more likely to experience bullying and discrimination that can result in poor mental health, which can have significant negative effects on children’s behaviour inside and outside of classrooms (Ron-Balsera, 2015; Spomer & Cowen, 2001; UNESCO 2018b). In order to address these difficulties, policymakers and school authorities should focus on addressing bullying within schools and supporting the well-being of students by preventing the development of depression, isolation, or any other mental health issue. Hence, we have added the *psychosocial support dimension* to our model, which comprises policy measures/actions that encourage the provision of counselling services, the establishment of partnerships between schools and community health clinics, and the development of bullying prevention policies and strategies.

Our model also recognizes the central importance of socioeconomic status (SES), as it has been consistently associated with lower educational outcomes, as well as lack of access to opportunities and resources (Marques et al., 2007; OECD, 2011; Ron-Balsera, 2015; Schleicher & Zoido, 2016; Schnepf, 2007; Volante, 2016). Schools in low SES neighbourhoods are often disadvantaged, which can increase the possibility of educational segregation and low-quality education (Schleicher & Zoido, 2016; Strelakova-Hughes, 2017). In order to capture this barrier—which is referred to as a double-disadvantage (Volante

et al., 2019), a sixth educational support dimension was established to analyze the provision of supports for children coming from low SES backgrounds. Under the *socioeconomic barriers dimension*, policy actions include the establishment of policies that provide support for students coming from low SES backgrounds, as well as support for disadvantaged schools.

Overall, our revised model, based on the *Comprehensive Support Model*, provides a good fit for Ontario given the strong similarities between Western industrialized school systems and the similar background characteristics of immigrant student populations within these traditional countries of immigration.

Purpose of Study and Major Research Questions

With a total of 3,851,770 immigrants living in Ontario, this province hosts over 50 per cent of the total Canadian foreign-born population (Statistics Canada, 2017a). Hence, the selection of Ontario as a case study allows for the examination of the policies guiding the education of the most ethnically diverse student population in Canada, and indeed the Western industrialized world, with the exception of Luxembourg (Bilgili et al., 2015). Given Ontario's characteristics, this study answers the following main research question: Do Ontario's education policy frameworks clearly articulate the educational support measures required for immigrant students to successfully integrate within school systems? Sub questions included (1) What policies, procedures, or strategies have been established by Ontario's MOE to address the complex needs and challenges experienced by immigrant students? (2) Do the policies established by the MOE align with available evidence-based research? Hence, this study will analyze the MOE policy frameworks against our conceptual framework to examine the extent to which current provincial policies, guidelines, and strategies respond to the needs of immigrant students.

Methodology

The study was based on a qualitative content analysis of all the MOE policy documents relating to education and integration of immigrant children. The policy documents selected represent guiding frameworks issued to school districts, which outline specific expectations regarding the implementation of the ministry's policies and programs, including directives for minority student populations such as immigrant students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018).

Document Collection and Classification

Our *Multi-Dimensional Support Model*, as well as relevant literature, guided the selection of documents and collection of data for this research. The policy documents were gathered through the MOE's website. Following the "Administrators" tab, the link under "Curriculum" contains all the curriculum documents governing kindergarten to Grade 12. Within this page, under the *Policy & Resource Documents* tab, the ministry has included all *Policy Reference* and *Policy/Program Memoranda* underpinning the current curriculum. It is important to note that *Policy/Program Memorandums* are policy directives that are issued to school districts and school authorities which outline specific expectations regarding the implementation of the ministry's policies and programs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018), hence, they were also included in this analysis.

The selection process of the policy documents involved two stages. First, each document under *Policy Reference* and *Policy/Program Memoranda* was briefly scanned. Policy documents and *Policy/Program Memoranda* that made explicit or implicit references to *immigrant students*, *at risk students*, *visible minorities*, *integration practices*, *language support programs*, *assessment methods*, *instruction methods*, *academic support*, *special education*, *literacy development*, *parental involvement*, *equity and inclusion*, *cultural diversity*, *ethnic diversity*, *teacher training*, *well-being*, *mental health support*, *psychological support*, *low socioeconomic status*, *disadvantaged students* and *disadvantaged schools* were selected. A total of 31 policy documents were selected during the initial analysis stage.

The second stage involved the selection of policy documents that provided information pertaining to the education and integration of immigrant children. Under the second stage, eight policy documents were discarded as they provided no useful information related to immigrant children, leaving the final analysis of 23 policy documents. The intended audience for all the MOE policy documents includes school districts, school authorities, teachers, and support staff (i.e., educational assistants). Furthermore, the policy documents analyzed were released between 1982 to 2017. Although this is a 35-year span, it

was important to include documents dating before the 1990s, since a number have not been revised (and still represent current policy) and contain crucial information for the analysis especially pertaining to the provision of psychological services. Tables 2 and 3 contain a list of documents selected for this analysis.

Table 2
Ministry of Education Policy Documents

Type of Document	Name of Document	Institution	Audience	Year Released
Policies and Procedures	Ontario Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12: Policy and Program Requirements, 2016	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2016
Policies and Procedures	Special Education in Ontario Kindergarten to Grade 12	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2017
Policies and Procedures	Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy.	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2009
Policies and Procedures	English Language Learners / ESL and ELD Programs and Services: Policies and Procedures for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2007
Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation	Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Ontario Education	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2014
Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation	Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation.	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2014
Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation	Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	1993
Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation	The Parents in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools.	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2010

Type of Document	Name of Document	Institution	Audience	Year Released
Guidelines	Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools, First Edition, Covering Grades 1 to 12	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2010
Guidelines	Learning for All: A Guide to Effective Assessment and Instruction for All Students, Kindergarten to Grade 12.	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2013
Strategy	Open Minds, Healthy Minds: Ontario's Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy	Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care	District School Boards and School Authorities	2011

Table 3
Ministry of Education Policy/Program Memoranda

Type of Document	Name of Document	Institution	Audience	Year Released
Policy/Program Memoranda	PPM 8: Identification of and Program Planning for Students with Learning Disabilities	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2014
Policy/Program Memoranda	PPM 11: Early Identification of Children's Learning Needs	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	1982
Policy/Program Memoranda	PPM 59: Psychological Testing and Assessment of Pupils	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	1982
Policy/Program Memoranda	PPM 81: Provision of Health Support Services in School Settings	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	1984
Policy/Program Memoranda	PPM 119: Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2013
Policy/Program Memoranda	PPM 129: Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR): Implementation in Ontario Secondary Schools	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2001
Policy/Program Memoranda	PPM 137: Use of Additional Teacher Resources to Support Student Success in Ontario Secondary Schools	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2005

Type of Document	Name of Document	Institution	Audience	Year Released
Policy/Program Memoranda	PPM 144: Bullying Prevention and Intervention	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2012
Policy/Program Memoranda	PPM 155: Diagnostic Assessment in Support of Student Learning	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2013
Policy/Program Memoranda	PPM 156: Supporting Transitions for Students with Special Education Needs	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2013
Policy/Program Memoranda	PPM 159: Collaborative Professionalism	Ontario Ministry of Education	District School Boards and School Authorities	2016

Coding and Document Analysis

In order to analyze the data from the policy documents, a qualitative content analysis was performed. Key concepts and variables were identified through deductive methods (Bowen, 2009; Eisenhardt, 1989; Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, 2015). Following our multi-dimensional support model, six initial coding categories were identified to represent the six educational support measures required to address the integration of immigrant children within school systems. Sub-categories were used to further organize relevant information (see Figure 1), taking into consideration the policy actions recommended under each measure, and operational definitions were determined for each category. The following operational definitions were used as guidelines when coding relevant data:

- *Linguistic support*: Policies, procedures, and/or strategies that involve assessment methods for ESL students, instruction methods for ESL students, provision of special/transitional classes, provision of language training, provision of teacher training on ESL, and encourages mother tongue instruction (European Commission, 2013).
- *Academic support*: Policies, procedures, and/or strategies that address grade placement, establish reception measures, provides induction programmes, addresses learning needs, encourages targeted support, provides mentors/tutors/teaching assistants, and promotes re-integration programmes (European Commission, 2013).
- *Increased parental involvement*: Policies, procedures, and/or strategies that increase the understanding of “parental involvement”, provide adequate information through various communication channels, promote the use of interpreters, and provides reception and orientation support for immigrant students and their families (European Commission, 2013).
- *Establishment of intercultural education and friendly learning environment*: Policies, procedures, and/or strategies that promote staff training for diversity, employing teachers and mentors from different migrant backgrounds, integrating cultural diversity in the curriculum, teaching heritage language, using of materials to improve intercultural education, and cultural accommodations (European Commission, 2013).
- *Psychological support*: Policies, procedures, and/or strategies that involve the establishment of counselling and psychological support services, partnerships between community-based organizations and schools, and bullying prevention strategies (Ballard et al., 2014; McKenzie et al., 2016; Mellin et al., 2013; Weist and Christodulu, 2000; Weist, Goldstein, Morris, & Bryant, 2003).
- *Addressing low SES*: Policies, procedures, and/or strategies that provide support for immigrant students coming from low SES backgrounds, as well as support for disadvantaged schools (Areepattamannil & Berinderjeet, 2013; Entorf & Lauk, 2008; Marques et al., 2007; OECD, 2011; Schleicher & Zoido, 2016; Schnepf, 2007; Strelakova-Hughes, 2017).

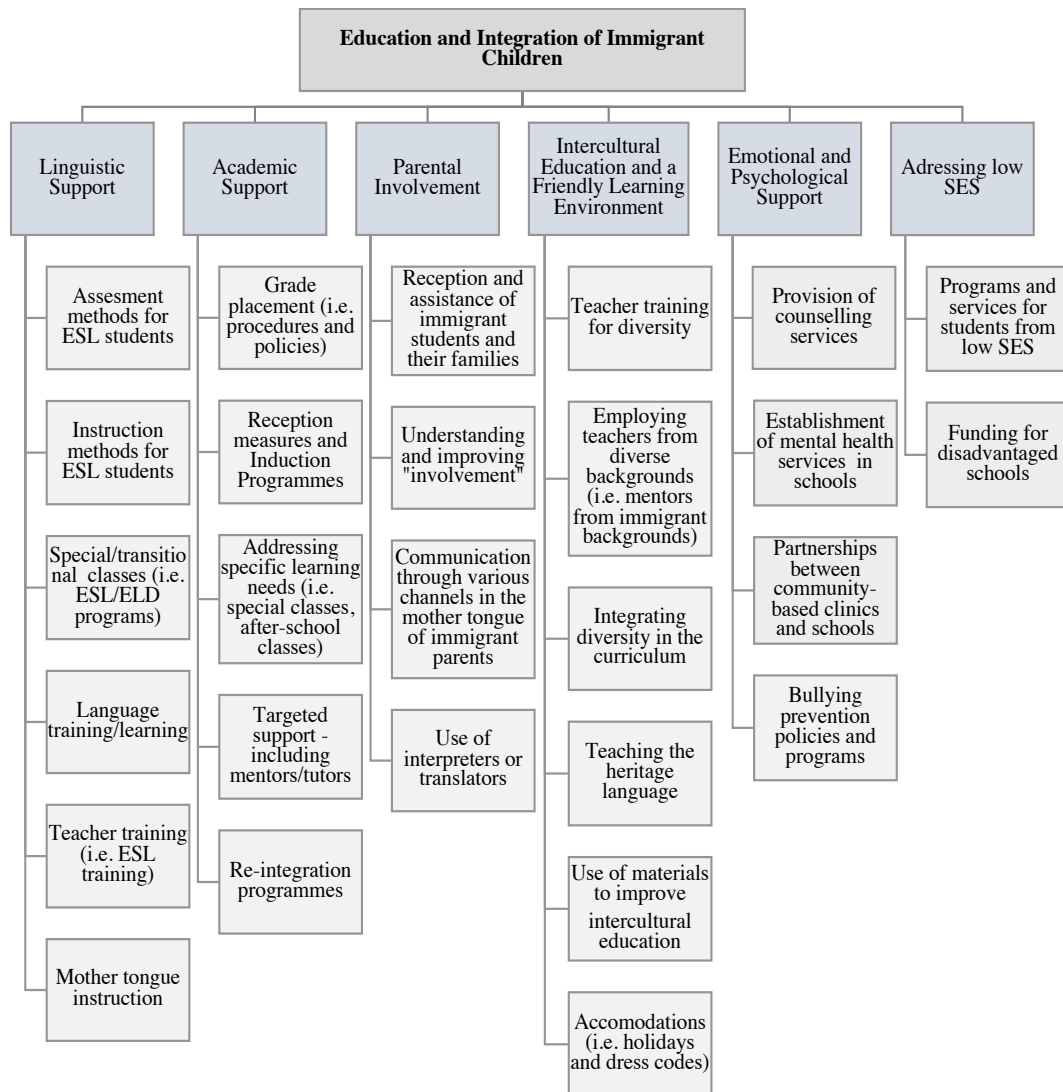


Figure 1. Coding Tree

Findings

In 2014, *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario* was released. This document outlined the MOE's renewed key goals and priorities, which include: achieving excellence, ensuring equity, promoting well-being, and enhancing public confidence (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a). Within this document, the ministry recognized that every student is unique and that each must have opportunities to achieve success "according to his or her own interests, abilities, and goals" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 2). According to the ministry, recent immigrants, along with other minority groups such as low-income families, aboriginal students, and students with special education needs, are usually at risk of lower achievement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). Hence, the ministry committed to "raising the bar for student achievement and reducing achievement gaps" by identifying and removing barriers through the provision of different support mechanisms (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 5).

Providing Linguistic Support: Ontario's Language-Acquisition Policy

As it was highlighted in the literature review, scholars and policy-makers have focused on language provision as a critical tool to allow immigrant students to fully integrate into the system (Sidhu & Taylor, 2007).

The MOE appears to agree with this approach, arguing that “the amount of integration should increase over time as students become more proficient in English” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 22). As part of the curriculum in English-language schools, the ministry has established that it is essential for all students in English-language schools “to graduate with the ability to use the language of instruction effectively for thinking, learning, and communicating” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 33). For this reason, English classes have been established as a required subject for students attending elementary and secondary schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a). Nevertheless, when it comes to children whose first language is other than English, the ministry requires schools to offer programs and courses to help English Language Learners (ELL) students develop proficiency in the language of instruction (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a). Moreover, the ministry recognizes that immigrant children coming from regions of instability may require additional support as well (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

The ministry has introduced Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) as the formal evaluation and credit-granting process, which allows schools to assess secondary school-aged children’s knowledge and skills against the overall expectations outlined in the provincial curriculum policy documents (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001, 2007). It is important to highlight that such assessment includes the knowledge and skills that a child has acquired outside secondary school in both formal and informal ways (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001, 2007). If the initial assessment indicates that an ELL student has limited prior schooling or knowledge of English, the school district and school is required to provide the student additional support in order to develop English language skills and bridge gaps in learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Hence, they have required school districts to develop program models such as English as a Second Language (ESL) programs or English Literacy Development (ELD) programs. The aim of these programs is to “allow students to learn the language of instruction in English language schools at the same time as they are working towards meeting the curriculum expectations” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 7). For this reason, ESL and ELD courses can be counted as compulsory English credit courses for ELL students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a). This method not only allows students to improve their English proficiency, but also to continue to accumulate credit courses in order to graduate (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a).

Additionally, the ministry also advises that, for schools where a large number of students are ELL, core-programs such as social studies, history, mathematics, and science should be taught by teachers who also hold ESL qualifications (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, 2016a). On the other hand, teachers who do not have ESL qualifications are encouraged to adapt their instructional programs in order to address the different English proficiency levels of students, as well as help students who require additional help (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, 2016a). According to the ministry, adaptations involve accommodations, such as adopting a specific teaching strategy, and modifications, such as changes to the curriculum expectations (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a).

Providing Academic Support: Ontario’s Special Education Policy

Under Ontario’s Special Education Policy, school districts must ensure the provision of special education programs and services for exceptional students, in order to provide learning opportunities and support mechanisms to students who require them in order to succeed in the system (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1982a, 2014c, 2017). Nevertheless, the ministry has made it clear that special education programs and services should not only be offered to exceptional students, but also for any other student who has demonstrated difficulties in learning and would benefit from additional support (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014c, 2016a). When a student is identified as needing additional support, the school is required to provide special education services designed to meet the student’s needs and develop their strengths (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). Special education programs may be delivered to students through different placements, which the Identification Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) will consider when making a decision regarding the type of support a student needs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014c). Table 4 outlines the placement options:

Table 4
IRPC Placement Options

Placement	Description
A regular class with indirect support	The student is placed in a regular class for the entire day, and the teacher receives specialized consultative services.
A regular class with resource assistance	The student is placed in the regular class for most or all of the day and receives specialized instruction, individually or in a small group, within the regular classroom from a qualified special education teacher.
A regular class with withdrawal assistance	The student is placed in the regular class and receives instruction outside of the classroom for less than 50 per cent of the school day, from a qualified special education teacher.
A special education class with partial integration	The student is placed by the IPRC in a special education class where the student-teacher ratio conforms to the standards in O. Reg. 298, section 31, for at least 50 per cent of the school day, but is integrated with a regular class for at least one instructional period daily.
A special education class full time	The student is placed by the IPRC in a special education class, where the student- teacher ratio conforms to the standards in O. Reg. 298, section 31, for the entire school day.

Source: (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017, p. D10)

Under PPM 137, the ministry mandates the effective use of resources in order to improve program availability, such as learning strategies courses, ESL and ELD programs, and other alternative programs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). Moreover, school districts are expected to distribute teachers between schools on the basis of student's needs, in order to offer more individual and specialized support to students in need (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). Finally, the ministry has encouraged schools to establish a Student Success Team and a Student Success Teacher that will directly support students who are experiencing difficulties or are at-risk of not graduating (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). The Student Success Team is responsible for "monitoring and tracking individual students' progress, providing direct support for differentiated instruction to meet the learning needs of students and to improve their achievement" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 37). Likewise, as a teacher gathers information regarding the student's progress or lack of progress, they can decide whether the current support given to students should be adjusted, or even decide whether additional resources are necessary and consider out-of-school professionals to intervene (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2017).

Increasing Parental Involvement: Ontario's Parent Engagement Policy

In order to sustain a positive school climate, the ministry mandates that schools and districts build their relationships with parents, as well as school community partners (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1993, 2013d). Ontario's Parent Engagement Policy is an essential component of Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education policy since its ultimate goal is to ensure all students, parents, and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013d). Therefore, under the Parent Engagement Policy, schools must ensure that parents have the necessary "skills, knowledge and tools" in order to become part of their children's education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b, p. 5). Parents play a vital role on the education of their children as they are the ones who shape the children's character and attitudes towards school, but also provide them direct support when they need it (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b, 2013d). The ministry argues that "the greater the support that families provide for their children's learning and educational progress, the more likely that their children will do well

in school and continue on with their education” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b, p. 8). Therefore, school districts and schools are expected to establish programs and initiatives that allow parents to participate and engage with the school in order to support student achievement and inclusion within schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b, 2013d). Hence, the ministry requires schools to provide the necessary support in order to allow immigrant children and their families to be able to navigate a system that is unfamiliar to them. This support includes providing the orientation in the first language of the student if possible, but also using interpreters or printed material in various languages in order to help children and their families feel welcomed (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

Promoting Intercultural Education and Friendly Learning Environments: Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Policy

This policy guideline recognizes diversity within schools and seeks to eliminate the systematic barriers that hinder students’ learning and development (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, 2013d). These barriers may be related to “sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, race, ethnic origin, religion, socio-economic background, physical or mental ability, or other factors” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014b, p. 6). All school districts are required to implement and monitor an equity and inclusive education policy that allows all students to feel welcome and accepted (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a). Following this mandate, the ministry requires schools to embed equity and inclusion within their daily operations, policy development, programming, curriculum resources, instruction, and assessment (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, 2013d, 2014b, 2016a). Schools are expected to enable students to see themselves represented in the curriculum, programs, and culture of the school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, 2013d, 2014b). Therefore, the establishment of programs or practices that allow students and staff to learn about different cultures, histories, and perspectives is crucial in order to engage students coming from different backgrounds and making them feel welcome (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013d, 2016a). Moreover, as a way to promote cultural diversity, school districts are expected to offer, as a subject, international languages other than English and French (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017).

Providing Emotional and Psychological Support: Ontario’s Bullying Prevention and Mental Health Strategy

The ministry encourages school districts and schools to implement school-wide bullying prevention policies that promote a culture of mutual respect and a positive school climate free of discrimination and harassment (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012a, 2013d). In order to help students establish relationships with other students, enhance their self-esteem, and achieve personal growth, the ministry argues that the provision of support to students through social workers, psychologists, and other professionals is important (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1993, 2012a, 2013d). The provision of such services aligns with the ministry’s renewed vision which aims to advance the well-being of students. The ministry has highlighted that “[students] cannot be expected to reach their full potential if they have mental health issues and if we do not provide the support they need” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a). Hence, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, the MOE has committed to enhance mental health resources in schools and provide training to educators on how to identify and intervene when they detect a student struggling with mental health issues (Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, 2011). Furthermore, following PPM 159, which mandates school districts to adopt a culture of collaborative professionalism with other professionals that can provide the support that children need (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1984, 2016b), they have committed to implement programs where schools can work with community-based agencies so that students can be referred for treatment (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a). For instance, under PPM 59, teachers can request out-of-school resources, such as psychologists or medical personnel, to perform a psychological assessment—in the student’s first language—and to plan a program that will help students succeed (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1982b, 2017).

Addressing Low Socioeconomic Status: Ontario’s Poverty Reduction Strategy and Education Funding Model

Under PPM 119 and Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education, the MOE is committed to establishing pol-

icies and programs that allow every student to succeed, regardless of their SES, or other factors (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). The ministry argues that the impact of low SES on children's education can be removed completely "when all education partners create the conditions needed for success" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014b, p. 60). Therefore, in collaboration with other ministries, specific policies and strategies have been pursued in order to target issues around socioeconomic needs, especially those relating to child poverty. This part of the analysis required us to explore beyond education policies and perform further research on the approaches taken by the ministry in order to address low SES among students.

Under Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services aims to break intergenerational poverty cycles experienced by children and youth through the provision of child benefit supports for low to moderate income families, which helps parents with the direct cost of raising children (Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2018). Additionally, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services has also collaborated with the MOE in order to establish the Student Nutrition Program in schools, which provides healthy snacks and meals to students over the course of the school year in order to have a positive impact on student's learning abilities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012b). According to the MOE, there is evidence that shows that the provision of nutrition programs can help improve attendance and attentiveness in class, and yield greater results for students in the long run (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012b).

On the other hand, even though immigrant children might settle in low SES neighbourhoods, the ministry has ensured that disadvantaged schools receive the necessary resources to be able to provide students the same quality education as other non-disadvantaged schools. Under Ontario's Education Funding Model, the government has established a programme through which disadvantaged schools receive equalization payments. These payments aim to equalize the financial resources among school districts in order to ensure that all school boards have enough financial resources to provide a base level of education, as well as provide extra funding to low-performing schools (Government of Ontario, 1997).

Discussion

Overall, the content analysis of the policy documents suggested that the MOE has established policy frameworks which aligns with the educational support measures needed to successfully integrate immigrant students within school systems. Although the policies provide useful information to address the unique challenges and needs of immigrant students, it is worth noting that they typically did *not* explicitly target or identify this student population, nor was there a stand-alone policy document for this student population.

The findings of our study present some challenges when attempting to answer our research question. In theory, Ontario's education policy frameworks clearly articulate the educational support measures required for immigrant students to successfully integrate within school systems. Yet, in practice, this integration might not be the case. As Viennet and Pont (2017) highlight in a research study conducted regarding implementation frameworks for education policies in OECD countries, "there is indeed a difference between passing a policy bill or a strategy and turning it into daily practices for teachers, school administrators and local communities" (p. 8). In many instances, policy-makers will pass a bill or strategy without giving educators further guidance on how to implement those policies. Although policy implementation is arguably the most important phase of the policy cycle, it is often the most neglected by policymakers (Ding Jie, 2016). According to Hogwood and Gunn (1984), in order for a policy to be successfully implemented, there must be a clear understanding of the objectives, resources must be available, tasks and responsibilities must be specified, and good communication and coordination between the different actors involved must be established.

Although the policy documents clearly state that school districts are responsible for the implementation of these policies, there are several questions that have been left open to interpretation. For instance, what specific modifications or accommodations should be done in order to establish a curriculum that enables students to see themselves represented in (see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, 2013d, 2014b)? Should the *Student Success Team* and *Student Success Teacher* receive any specific training in order to directly support immigrant students who are experiencing difficulties graduating (see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005)? What kinds of adaptations and/or modifications should teachers pursue in order to support immigrant students in classrooms (see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a)? How should schools provide information regarding antiracism and antidiscrimination to students and parents in order

to increase their understanding of equity and inclusive education (see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013d)? How should schools ensure that immigrant parents have the necessary skills, knowledge and tools in order to become part of their children's education, and what kinds of skills, knowledge, and tools is the ministry referring to (see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b)? And, perhaps most importantly, will districts and schools consistently recognize the constellation of unique learning challenges faced by immigrant students in the absence of targeted and specific policies for this population?

When taking into consideration these unanswered questions, it is important to note that requiring schools to adopt a policy without clear guidance on how to execute their mandate, might result in the failure of the policy or uneven implementation efforts. Although our study shows that the policies, procedures, and strategies that have been established to address the complex needs of immigrant students align with the available evidence-based research, it is important that the ministry considers the development of more targeted and direct evidence-based recommendations on the kinds of programs, services, and practices that should be adopted by schools to fulfill the ministry's mandates. Additionally, the oldest documents analyzed in this study are those guiding the provision of health services for students, which were drafted 35 years ago. Yet, the needs of children 35 years ago are not the same as the needs of children today. With immigrant students being a particularly vulnerable group in need of psychological support, it is essential that the ministry develops current policies based on current practices in the field. Ideally, these health and well-being policy documents would recognize the unique challenges faced by immigrants such as bullying and post-traumatic stress disorder, to name but a few.

It also seems reasonable that, given the relative proportion of immigrant students in the Ontario education system, this group warrants a stand-alone policy document to comprehensively address all of their unique learning needs. At present, districts and schools must navigate through a multitude of policy frameworks and policy/program memorandums that may directly and/or indirectly address the various issues and challenges that immigrant students face. Our analysis identified no less than 23 relevant policy documents and PPM within Ontario—one would be hard pressed to find a district or school leader, working in a school with or without a significant immigrant population, that is able to keep abreast of all these provisions and mandates. The development of a stand-alone policy document, which should be updated on a regular basis, seems like a wise investment in a culturally and ethnically diverse province like Ontario. The future increases in immigrant students, suggests that Ontario's teachers will increasingly face the opportunities and challenges that come from working with this unique student population. Overall, the provision of a stand-alone document may help make this student population more visible to educators.

Limitations and Future Research

When taking into consideration the fact that policies do not always translate into practices, it is important to acknowledge that this analysis does not provide data related to actual policy implementation efforts across the province. With the acquired knowledge regarding the policies established by the ministry, further research can be conducted to understand whether particular policies advanced by the ministry have been implemented successfully and whether potential gaps may exist in particular areas and/or subgroups of immigrants. Additionally, a further examination of the policies' effectiveness can lead to improved educational policy administration within the province, which can have a significant positive impact on student outcomes.

Conclusion

To date, our analysis suggests that Ontario has done a fairly good job of recognizing the needs of immigrant students. Nevertheless, our analysis also suggested that there is room for improvement, given the previously noted limitations of the current policy structure. How ministries of education promote educational equity for their most vulnerable student populations is a pressing challenge, particularly given the increasing number of immigrants that are making Canada their home. Hence, our analysis underscores the importance of greater policy coherence within Ontario as well as the ongoing role that evidenced-based research should serve in the development and refinement of existing education policies.

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