Original Paper

Studying the Learning Environment of EL Newcomer Students in the Schooling Process

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Abstract

In this study, we examined the schooling process of newcomer students in secondary urban schools involving survey research with newcomers and other ELs (n=268). Additionally, we conducted focus groups with students (n=10) and educators (n=12). Through qualitative measures, we examined: (a) grade level placement, (b) content area placement, and (c) academic challenges confounded by L1 proficiency, previous academic experiences, and socio-cultural experiences among newcomers. We employed quantitative methods (e.g., Descriptive, Chi Square, Factor Analysis) to detect group differences in regard to perceptions of the classroom learning environment as a function of time in the United States. In general, the Principal Component Factor analysis yielded ten factors that accounted for 66.8% of the variance. These factors provide insight into key components for the development of effective classroom learning environments in order to serve EL newcomers in the schooling process. The implications for teaching and learning practices within the classroom and school learning environments of EL newcomers are discussed.

Keywords

newcomers, English learners, secondary schools, learning environment, teaching practices

1. Introduction

opportunities to immigrant children entering the schooling process (Adelman & Taylor, 2015; Boyle, 2015; Rivera, Lynch, Li, & Obamehinti, 2016). This is because there are multiple factors that may hinder children's academic development such as the child's previous academic experience (e.g., limited formal schooling), the families' migration experience, and the lack of a classroom environment conducive to learning, as well as the lack of protective factors in the school environment to support immigrant

children academic development (Jafffe-Walter, 2018; Niehaus & Adelson, 2014; Sibley & Brabeck, 2017).

The English Learner (EL) population includes newcomer families and their school-age children. They represent voluntary as well as involuntary immigrants and refugees who are facing tremendous challenges in school settings (Short & Boyson, 2012). For example, Suarez-Orozco, Gaytan, Bang, Pakes, O'Connor, and Rhodes' (2010) figures from the U.S. Census indicate that 31.1% of the foreign-born population who works full-time earned less than $20,000 per year. This socio-economic situation forces many of them to reside in low-cost neighborhoods, which are often dangerous, poverty-stricken, and offer poor living conditions (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). To compound matters, many newcomer and refugee families are coming from war-torn developing countries and running away from organized crime. Consequently, many of the school-age children were exposed to the traumas of war and witnessed violence (Carlson, Cacciatore, & Klimek, 2012; Nur & Hunter, 2009; Rivera et al., 2016).

Aside from living in poor conditions and having difficulties speaking English, urban immigrant students are more likely than suburban students to be exposed to risks associated with less desirable outcomes (Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2018). For example, these students are more likely to encounter safety and health risks, less likely to have access to regular health care and more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors (Lippman et al., 1996). Within this diverse population, there are newcomers who thrive academically; however, there is also a significant proportion that struggle academically which can have devastating consequences that may perpetuate a family cycle of poverty (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010).

The academic struggles of newcomers can have consequences on their educational achievement. For example, research by Carhill, Suarez-Orozco, and Paez (2008) indicates that 51% of English language learners in the United States who spoke English with difficulty did not complete high school compared to 31% of students who spoke English without difficulty. Furthermore, national longitudinal data indicate that the great majority of the nation's ELs are scoring at or below basic levels of academic proficiency (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). For example, findings from a national assessment of reading comprehension show that only 4% of eighth grade EL students scored at or above the reading proficient level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). In addition, research by Carhill et al. (2008) indicates that these students' vocabulary levels are often well below average, sometimes with a group average as low as the 20th percentile. Such low vocabulary levels are insufficient to support effective reading comprehension and writing, and in turn have a negative impact on their overall academic success (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006). Thus, EL students continue to struggle in greater proportions as they encounter an increase in the demand for numeracy and literacy skills (Carhill et al., 2008; Francis et al., 2006). A closer examination of their schooling process and perceptions of it can assist in improving the learning environment of English learners, particularly newcomer students who have arrived to the country within the past three years.

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The classroom environment of EL newcomers plays an important role in their academic success. For instance, research by the National Mathematics Advisory Panel (2008) shows that there are large measurable differences in the effectiveness of content area teachers in generating achievement gains. Those classroom environment differences in teachers account for 12% to 14% of total variability in students' achievement gains during a school year (National Mathematics Advisory Panel, 2008). The panel's findings also indicate that the effects of teachers on students' achievement compounds if students receive a series of effective or ineffective classroom teachers during their schooling process (National Mathematics Advisory Panel, 2008). Therefore, understanding the ecology of the classroom learning environment is a vital step in the process of identifying factors that contribute, or pose threats to students' learning and academic success.

In the present study, we seek to examine newcomer students' academic success across secondary schools in an urban setting. The study focuses on several issues related to students' schooling process such as: (a) students' perceptions and attitudes towards their classroom learning environments, (b) students' experiences with grade level and content area placement and (c) students' perceptions of the classroom environment in regard to second Language (L2) teaching and learning processes. Other factors examined include (d) individual students' attributes (e.g., students' motivation, help-seeking behaviors, differences due to the age of arrival and/or time in the USA), and (e) educators' perceptions on students' needs and educators' needs for professional development. Understanding the schooling process of newcomers and other ELs may also enable us to identify specifically those alterable factors for their learning and academic success as well as assist in the design of preventive measurements and interventions for newcomer students.

2. Research Framework

This study examines the schooling process of EL newcomers through a learning environment research framework. Learning environment research focuses on indicators and points of leverage that promote students' success through the development of supportive systems that serve as protective factors for students (Benard, 2004; Condly, 2006; Rivera et al., 2016). Theoretically, learning environment is an area of research that has important implications for the educational improvement of EL students. Empirically, it focuses on examining students who succeed in academic settings despite the presence of adverse conditions (e.g., low SES, single parent, English as a second language) that may place these students at-risk of academic failure (Haertel, Walberg, & Haertel, 1981).

3. Review of Literature

The classroom learning environment has been extensively researched in the past three decades (Borman & Overman, 2004; Downey, 2008; 2008; Haertel et al., 1981; Masten, Herbers, Cutuli, & Lafavor, Morrison, Brown, D'Incau, O'Farrell, & Furlong, 2006; Nettles, Mucherah, & Jones, 2000; Padron, Waxman, & Huang, 1999; Rivera, Lynch, Li, & Obamehinti, 2016; Waxman & Huang, 1996;

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Waxman, Huang, & Padron, 1997). Several major reviews and research syntheses have concluded that the socio-psychological environment significantly impacts students' cognitive and affective outcomes (Haertel et al., 1981). From a theoretical perspective, learning environment research emphasizes the student-mediating or student-cognition paradigm, which maintains that the way in which students perceive and react to their learning environment is more important in terms of influencing students' academic outcomes (Knight & Waxman, 1991). In other words, this paradigm assumes that better understanding and the improvement of teaching and learning practices can emerge by examining the ways that instructional activities and the learning environment are viewed or interpreted by the students themselves (Chavez, 1984; Fraser, 1990).

Given the growing number of EL students, it is essential to understand and serve this population effectively (Carhill et al., 2008). For example, there are newcomers with unique needs such as those who enroll in the U.S. schools at the middle and high school levels. These students come with limited English proficiency and sometimes with limited formal schooling. These students are an especially diverse group of learners. As they enter the school environment, they differ on key factors related to academic achievement, including: (a) amount and degree of formal schooling, (b) level of literacy in their native language, and (c) age of arrival in the U.S. schools (Carhill et al., 2008; Francis et al., 2006; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders & Christian, 2006). English learners also face cultural and linguistic challenges that confound their learning experiences and academic outcomes. The challenges faced by newcomer students point to the linguistic, socio-cultural, and pedagogical issues that need to be addressed as points of leverage for their academic success.

4. Learning the New Language in Socio-Cultural Context

Research indicates that for those EL newcomers who are literate in their first language, with exposure to academic instruction in their country of origin, much of their native language reading skills can be applied to their reading in the second language (e.g., English) (Carhill et al., 2008; Cummins, 1979; Short & Boyson, 2012). However, there are several factors that affect this process of applying (or transferring) the literacy skills from the first Language (L1) into a second Language (L2). These include the individual's reading proficiency in their first language as well as the degree of overlap between the oral and written characteristics of the second language (i.e., English) to the EL newcomers' native language (Francis et al., 2006). Some of the similarities between languages that affect this process of learning to read in a second language include: (a) the conventions for writing (e.g., both languages are alphabetic, writing progresses from left to right in both languages and languages share orthographic elements), (b) commonalities in the sounds of the two languages and in the orthographic conventions for representing similar and different sounds, and (c) the degree of overlap between languages in semantic elements or cognates (Francis et al., 2006). For example, in the case of languages such as Chinese Mandarin and Persian Farsi that are dissimilar from English, the challenges may be in areas including orthographic conventions, writing processes as well as phonology to name a

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few (Francis et al., 2006).

Research also shows that EL newcomers who arrive in the middle and high school years encounter less support for language learning in the school environment; they have more complex academic content to learn in the new language (English); and they have less time to catch up to their native-speaking peers before they encounter gate-keeping assessments that have serious consequences for their future (Carhill et al., 2008). This means that while simultaneously developing basic conversational abilities and basic reading skills, these students must quickly begin to develop oral and written academic language skills for their success in content-area subjects (Carhill et al., 2008; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). In classroom settings, this translates into challenges in the vertical and horizontal alignment of curriculum in order to meet the needs of EL newcomers. Meeting the needs of newcomer students will require concerted and thoughtful efforts (e.g., differentiated instruction, scaffolding, modeling, contextualization, and instructional dialogue) that account for multiple effective classroom strategies as well as for interconnected efforts across classrooms and grade levels as students continue to progress in their schooling. This is important as we consider the demarcated differences between the socio-cultural experience of refugee students, children crossing the border (involuntary immigrants) and voluntary immigrants. These experiences may affect how they perceive and react (e.g., socio-emotionally) to the classroom learning environment (Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Rivera et al., 2016).

5. Pedagogical Points of Leverage for the Classroom Learning Environment

Foundational research (Ovando & Combs, 2018; Short & Boyson, 2012; Dalton, 2007; Benard, 2004; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Gonzalez et al., 1993) indicates that there are social and intellectual resources that can be mobilized to begin the process of enhancing teaching and learning in the classroom setting. Students' previous knowledge, first language, and socio-cultural practices are experiences that can serve as a bridge to new practices in order to build new academic competencies. Educational practices are effective when students' ways of knowing, talking, valuing and interacting are taken as the basis for patterning classroom activity when building new academic knowledge (Dalton, 2007; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

Pedagogical points of leverage include those factors that can enhance students' academic skills, e.g., contextual ways of teaching, responsive assistance to students' performance, and modeling content as well as supporting their overall socio-emotional development (e.g., sense of belonging). Instruction must be connected to students' lives and developing newcomer students' sense of belonging in the classroom through joint productive activities (Rivera et al., 2016; Rogoff, 1991; Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). In settings outside the classroom, even the youngest children, as well as mature adult learners, develop their competencies in the context of joint productive activity (Moll, 1990; Rogoff, 1991; Tharp et al., 2000; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Whether it is mother and child cooking together, or experts and novices producing together, shared ways of understanding the world are created through the development of language systems and word meanings that are used

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during joint productive activities in the learning environment (Rogoff, 1991; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Language, thinking, values, and culture have deep interconnections; dialogue, particularly during joint productive activity, supports students' academic achievement and affective development (Au, 1980; Cazden, 1986; Tharp, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978). Likewise, newcomer students need authentic and purposeful opportunities to speak and write, to practice language use, and to receive the natural feedback of conversation from their teachers and peers. For example, oral and written language development can be fostered by restating, modeling, offering alternative phrasing, and questioning (Rivera, Galarza, Entz, & Tharp, 2002; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

Through collaborative practices in the classroom, newcomer students can also develop the social skills and inter-group relations essential to academic success (Ovando & Combs, 2018). Collaborative activities influence students by: (a) providing opportunities for students to communicate with each other; (b) developing social, academic, and communication skills; (c) decreasing anxiety and boosting self-confidence and self-esteem through individual contributions and achievement of group goals; (d) improving individual and group relations by learning to clarify, assist, and challenge others' ideas; (e) developing proficiency in English by providing students with rich language experiences that integrate speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Christian, 1995; Rivera & Zehler, 1991); and (f) providing skills that are necessary to function in real-life situations, such as the utilization of context for meaning, the seeking of support from others, and the comparing of nonverbal and verbal cues. Instructional models that integrate these teaching strategies offer positive academic, social and developmental outcomes for all children, including ELs (Francis et al., 2006; Masten et al., 2008; Morrison et al., 2006).

In the present study, we examine urban middle school and high school students' attitudes and perceptions toward their classroom learning environment as well as their perceptions on what works regarding effective teaching and learning practices. Moreover, it examines key differing characteristics in the schooling process of newcomer in contrast to other EL students and provides potential points of leverage for students' academic success.

6. Method

6.1 Research Questions

The research was guided by three questions. They represent the guiding themes used in this line of inquiry. They include:

1) What are the schooling processes and academic experiences of newcomer students and other ELs at the secondary level?

2) What are the students' attitudes and perceptions of the classroom learning environment as it relates to their teaching and learning?

3) What guidance can this research provide for the professional development and training of educators in order to meet the needs of EL newcomer students in the schooling process?

6.2 Participants and Settings

Survey participants included 268 newcomers and other EL students from one urban middle school and one urban high school in Texas. The newcomer classification was operational zed using the current definition in the literature of those students (e.g., immigrant and refugee) who have lived in the country for three years or less. The EL general population represents those students with over three years of residence in the country (Francis et al., 2006). Focus groups were also conducted with a total of twelve educators. One focus group was conducted at the middle school level (n = 6) and it included teachers, school counselors, school principal, and assistant principals. The second group with educator was carried out at the high school level with a similar group of participants (n = 6). The research team also conducted two focus groups with newcomer students; one focus group at the middle school (n = 5) and the other at the high school setting (n = 5).

6.3 Instruments

The design of the study involved random surveys with EL newcomer students. In general, the students' survey instrument focused on gathering the following information: (a) background of participants such as level of education, years residing in the U.S., grade level achieved in the country of origin, current grade level, (b) participants' experience in the school/classroom setting, attitude and beliefs about their schooling process, and (c) participants' learning experiences, and activities related to their schooling such as their previous knowledge and linguistic processes for mastery of content knowledge. The survey contained 58 items and it was administered in either English or Spanish.

In the case of the focus groups, protocols were developed for teachers and students. Each contained approximately ten open-ended questions. In the case of the students' focus group protocol, the questions were also translated to Spanish in order to accommodate the linguistic diversity of participants.

6.4 Procedures

This study is part of a larger project on teacher professional development. The goal of this five-year project was to provide ESL supplemental certification and professional development for middle and high school teachers serving EL newcomer students across multiple schools and districts. The survey participants represent a random sample of middle school and high school EL students from two schools (middle school and high school).

The goal of the focus groups was to acquire a thicker qualitative description of the factors that students and educators felt were importance for the academic development of EL newcomer students in the schooling process. Students were randomly chosen to participate in the focus groups given a list of classrooms that were providing ESL instruction to newcomers; however, in the case of the teachers, the criteria selection was to be the teacher of newcomer students participating in the surveys.

Two focus groups were carried-out among middle school (n = 5) and high school (n = 5) students; and two focus groups among middle school (n = 6) and high school (n =6) educators, respectively. In the case of the educators, participants were instructed on the procedures for answering the focus group

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questions according to their roles as counselors, teachers, and principals. All participants in the student focus groups were newcomer students. Rooms were secured at the school sites to videotape all focus groups for subsequent transcription and qualitative data analysis.

6.5 Results

In general, the findings from this study are presented in a mixed method research approach. First, a qualitative descriptive analysis of the focus groups carried-out with students and educators is offered. Secondly, a section on the quantitative analysis of the surveys is presented, using descriptive statistics, Chi Square and Factor Analysis.

6.6 Focus Groups with Students

The results from the students' focus groups, as shown in Figure 1, are revealing at several levels. The findings point to the difficulties students are facing academically in areas such as their previous level of school (e.g., schooled or unschooled newcomers) and age of arrival (e.g., age equivalence, grade placement, or over age). One key finding shows the need for what students called "student orientation" or a "joint approach that includes students, teachers, and counselors in the selection process of their classes". From the students' point of view, such activities may assist

them at several levels: (a) to understand the schooling process; therefore, decreasing their frustrations with classes and (b) to provide the appropriate grade level placement in order to avoid the sense of failure experienced due to grade level misplacement issues (ex. too high or too low academic content) (See Figure 1).
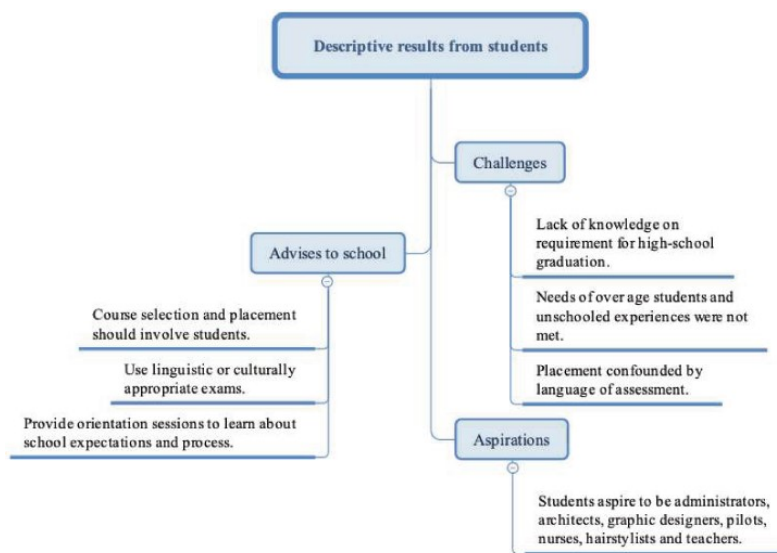

Figure 1. Pattern of Responses from Focus Group Sessions Carried-out with Secondary Newcomer Students (n=10) in Regard to Their Needs and Schooling Process

6.7 Focus Groups with Educators

The focus groups with middle and high school educators yield some important patterns on the current status for grade placement of EL newcomer students (See Figure 2). In general, they expressed the need for: (a) teacher Professional Development (PD) focused on instruction methods for newcomers, including the learning of Spanish for educators so they can assist their biggest population of EL newcomers (e.g., they need to learn high order vocabulary in Spanish in order to assist students in complex activities in English), (b) training on the use of ESL strategies so they can provide effective activities in their classrooms, (c) instruments to assess newcomer students in their first language (L1), and (d) a classification system to identify students for appropriate placement (e.g., newcomers, general EL population, etc.) (See Figure 2).
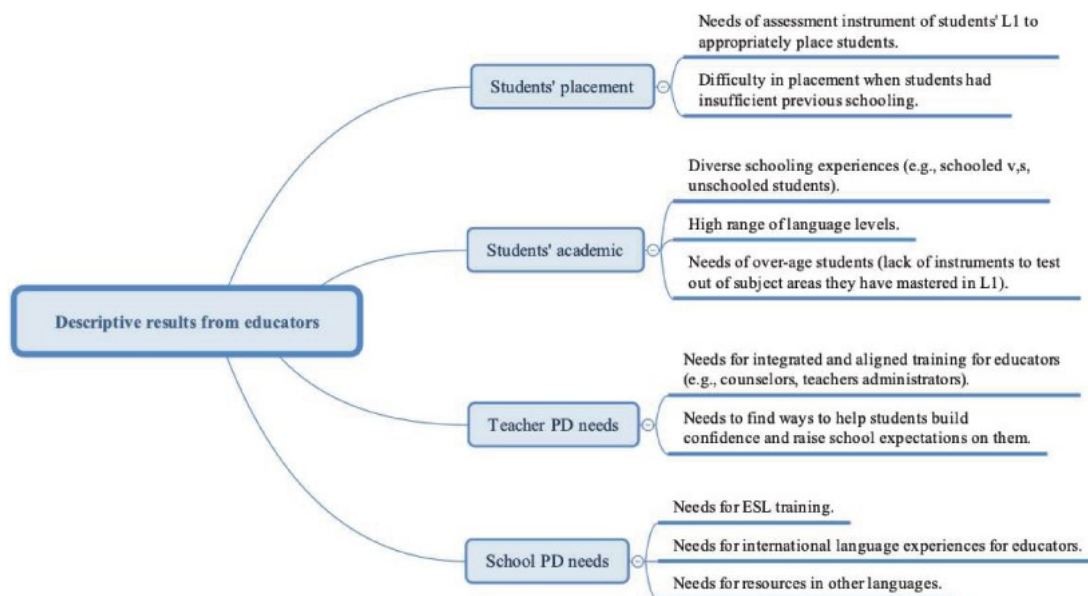

Figure 2. Educators' Pattern of Responses (n=12) from Focus Group Questions in Regard to the Multiple Needs and Schooling Processes of Newcomer Students

6.8 Findings from the Students' Survey

The Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to examine the survey data. Parametric statistics were run to examine descriptive aspects of the student population. Furthermore, Chi-Square and Factor Analysis procedures were used to examine participants' differences in learning strategies as well as their consensus on beliefs and perceptions of the classroom learning environment, respectively.

7. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive analysis of the students' surveys showed a high degree of diversity in the student population. The survey results indicate representation from Afghanistan, Nepal, Korea, Somalia, Sudan,

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Vietnam, Mexico and Central America (e.g., El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala) as well as U.S. born EL students. They come from countries that exemplify not only cultural but also linguistic diversity. However, it is important to notice that 51% of the 268 students surveyed come from Mexico. This is congruent with research that shows that approximately 70% of the students in the classrooms, in this district, are of Mexican descent. The findings from the survey also point to the wide diversity in the newcomer students' level of schooling at point of arrival into the U.S. From the sample, 14% did not attend school, 10% had an elementary level of schooling, 26% achieved a middle school level of schooling and 50%reached a high school level of schooling. However, in this last category, students clustered at ninth and tenth grade. There were only four students who had reached eleventh and twelfth grade in their respective countries.

7.1 Chi-Square Results

Chi-Square analysis shows the results from the students' survey items to be statistically significant (See Table 1). For this analysis, the EL category was dichotomized in order to examine the differences between those students who have been in the country for one month to three years (EL newcomers) and those who have been in the country for longer than three years (EL general).

Table 1. Chi-Square Results on Students' Perceptions of the Classroom Learning Environment and Their Language Strategy Processes for Understanding Subject Matter by Classification of Groups as Newcomers and EL General Population in Secondary School

Indicators	Newcomers (n = 179) %	EL general (n = 89) %	*Chi-Square*
V33. When I start an assignment, I usually finish it even if I need to ask for help.			5.46*
Yes	81.7	70.1	
No	17.7	29.9	
V48. My Teacher does tell me why I get problems or answers wrong for the work I do in this class.			6.27*
Yes	87.0	75.9	
No	12.4	24.1	
V51. I plan to go to college			6.69*
Yes	84.0	75.3	
No	13.7	24.7	
V53. What I am learning in this class will help me in my future career.			4.70*
Yes	97.7	92.0	
No	2.3	8.0	

V54. I need help figuring out how to succeed in school.		20.0***
Yes	87.4	65.9
No	11.5	34.1
V56. I usually translate, in my head, to my first language in order to understand what I need to do in class.		43.2***
Yes	93.8	62.9
No	5.7	37.1
V57. Many of the things we do in this class I already learned while in school in my country of origin.		7.39*
Yes	58.3	41.6
No	41.1	58.4
V58. When I cannot do a problem, I usually think about it in my first language and that helps me to figure out how to solve it.		19.7***
Yes	90.9	70.8
No	8.5	29.2

* *p< .05. *** p< .00.*

Table 1 reports on the chi-square results by student group (i.e., newcomers (*n* = 179) and EL general (*n* = 89). The findings indicate statistically significant differences between newcomers and EL general students on their perceptions of the classroom environment, their attitudes towards education and linguistic challenges they face academically. Newcomer students reported having received more assistance and feedback from teachers than the EL general population, χ^2 (2, n = 262) = 5.46, *p <.05.* Newcomer students also have a positive perspective about schooling and to what education entails for their future, χ^2 (2, n= 264) = 6.69, p < .05. In terms of their current academic needs, we also find significant differences between newcomers and EL in general, for example, more newcomers expressed the need to figure out how to be successful in school, χ^2 (2, n = 262) = 20.00, *p <.001*. This is in regard to their need to learn how to navigate the educational system; however, they also feel supported by teachers as indicated by other survey items. The academic challenges for newcomers are in the form of linguistic barriers. For example, newcomers expressed that they need to translate into their first language in order to understand what to do in class, χ^2 (2, n= 265) = 43.15, *p <.001. Newcomers also expressed that when they do not know how to solve a problem, they first think about it in their first Language (L1) and that helps them to figure it out, χ^2 (2, n = 265) = 19.71, *p < .001.* This linguistic process of using their L1 to figure out academic challenges in L2 is also intertwined with their academic background in their country of origin, as previously discussed in the literature review. For example, significant differences among newcomer and EL general population were also found regarding what they perceive to be their educational background knowledge, χ^2 (2, n= 264) = 7.39, *p <.05.*

7.2 Factor Analysis Results

A Principal Component Factor (PCF) analysis was performed to reduce the survey data to meaningful themes that may further inform the teaching and learning of EL newcomers and other ELs in the schooling process. Due to the non-orthogonal nature of the survey items, obliging rotation was used, as a method of extraction. The results are shown in Table 2. Overall, PCF analysis yielded ten factors that accounted for 66.8% of the variance with item loading criteria set at .30 or higher for each factor and item communalities ranging from .57 to .88. The findings revealed three themes under which these factors were organized. *Theme 1: students' beliefs and values*- this included factors (Fs) related to (a) students' self-efficacy (F1, eigenvalue = 3.72), (b) college aspirations (F3, eigenvalue = 2.01), (c) students' academic strategies (F4, eigenvalue = 1.77), and (d) students' perseverance (F6, eigenvalue = 1.40). *Theme 2: Teaching and Learning*—this included factors (Fs) related to (a) teacher responsiveness (F5, eigenvalue = 1.46), (b) teacher instructional practices (F2, 2.36), and (c) teacher feedback (F10, eigenvalue = 1.05). *Theme 3: the classroom learning environment*- this theme included Factors (Fs) related to (a) students' participation and/or inclusiveness (F7, eigenvalue 1.26), (b) perception of fair classroom practices (F8, eigenvalue = 1.23), and (c) perceived challenges in context (F9, eigenvalue = 1.11).

Table 2. Principal Component Factor Analysis of Newcomers and EL General Population with Oblimin Rotation (n = 268)

Eigen values Factor Loadings Communality			
Factor 1: Student Self-Efficacy	3.715 (14.289%)		
30. I am one of the best students in this class.		.792	.649
28. I am very good in the subject I am studying in this class.		.727	.628
29. Most students in this class do better than me.		-.636	.547
32. I am one of the poorest performing students in this class.		-.420	.560
Factor 2: Teacher Instructional Practices	2.360 (9.078%)		
44. My teacher helps me when I have trouble with my work.		.820	.744
48. My teacher does tell me why I get problems or answers wrong for the work I do in this class.		.672	.581
46. My teacher lets me know when my work is good.		.623	.653
Factor 3: College Aspirations	2.010 (7.731%)		
51. I plan to go to college.		.934	.878
52. I plan to finish college.		.930	.857
Factor 4: Students' Academic Strategies	1.769 (6.803%)		
58. When I cannot do a problem, I usually think about it in my first language and that helps me to figure out how to solve it.		-.846	.748

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56. I usually translate, in my head, to my first		-.778	.726
54. I need help in figuring out how to succeed in school.		-.471	.559
Factor 5: Teacher Responsiveness	1.459 (5.613%)		
45. My teacher carefully checks all my work.		.834	.744
49. I think I have what it takes to succeed in school.		.632	.629
Factor 6: Students' Perseverance	1.400 (5.383%)		
35. When I do my work in this class, I am usually careful to make sure I do it right.		.760	.728
38. I expect to do well in this class since I know how to do most of the work and when I have questions I ask for help.		.732	.654
36. When I have hard work in this class, I usually keep trying to finish it even if it takes more time.		.480	.606
Factor 7: Participation in Classroom Environment	1.255 (4.825%)		
39. I am treated the same as other students in this class.		.725	.574
41. My teacher calls on me as much as other students.		.586	.651
34. When I do well in this class, it is because I work hard.		.554	.588
Factor 8: Perception of Fair Classroom Practices	1.228 (4.725%)		
42. I get the same chance to answer questions in class as other students.		.748	.659
31. I do my work as well as other students in this class.		.558	.619
Factor 9: Perceived Challenges on Content	1.108 (4.262%)		
37. Sometimes I am lucky to do well in this class given the difficulty of the subject.		.850	.773
57. Many of the things we do in this class I already learned while in school in my country of origin.		.450	.696
Factor 10: Teacher Feedback	1.054 (4.054%)		
47. My teacher always tells me how I am doing in class.		-.795	.730
50. I plan to finish high school.		.501	.580
Total Variance Accounted for by Extracted Factors	**66.764%**		

8. Discussion

The findings are discussed considering the three research questions. First, we sought to understand the schooling process and academic experience of newcomers and other ELs at the secondary level. This line of inquiry revealed that students felt disconnected from their schooling process. On the other hand, they wish to be more involved in the decision making (ex. sense of agency) regarding their academic placement. This seems to suggest that a newcomer program that implements activities that foster initiative and choice might serve to empower newcomers by creating a sense of ownership and socio-emotional development in school. These are important aspects to consider as the role of educators

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is to develop self-regulated learners.

However, self-regulation is a learned skill, and as these students come into a new environment, they need assistance in order to make positive adjustments (ex. cognitive modeling, problem solving, etc.). The findings also indicate that students come into the schooling process with great aspirations (e.g., wanting to become doctors, businesspeople, and architects). However, somewhere along the way, they disengage from the schooling process and from these types of aspirations. This disengagement places them at risk of academic failure. However, their answers reveal that these are solvable problems. Future programmatic efforts need to be focused on helping them understand the importance and meaningfulness of school (ex. connecting the known with the unknown). As educators, we also know that meaningful discourse builds on previous knowledge. Therefore, students' involvement and engagement in the process, as expressed by them and with the guidance of educators, is vital.

Furthermore, the educators' focus groups also addressed the need for differentiated instructional practices and differentiated teacher professional development. This is because in the same way that students need differentiated teaching and learning practices, due to their diverse socio-cultural backgrounds; likewise, teachers also require differentiated professional development that accounts for their diverse needs for effective teaching in the classroom (e.g., linguistic, cultural, teaching strategies, etc.). The findings also revealed some overlapping concerns by educators, such as students lacking in reading skills and academic English. However, the urgency for action by school and district administrators was differently accentuated by middle and high school educators. This needs to be understood in the context of the time that is available for these students to perform and grow academically. It may be that at middle school there is a lesser sense of urgency in comparison to the high school level. For example, high school newcomer students only have a maximum of 4 years (if they enter at 9th grade) to master English and master content as well as to meet graduation requirements and be college ready.

Secondly, the students' attitudes and perceptions of the classroom environment, as it relates to their learning, revealed that there are demarcated differences and academic needs between newcomers (less than three years in school) and other ELs who have been in the schooling process for longer than three years. This variability of schooling experiences is an important issue to consider for grade placement as well as for effective teaching and learning practices to be used with EL newcomer students. Therefore, future teacher trainings should include second language acquisition models and linguistic methods that combine ESL and bilingual teaching practices. They are learning a second language; therefore, ESL strategies are needed, but they also speak another language and have grown in other cultural settings. Therefore, bilingual strategies will serve to connect their knowledge and skills in L1 to new knowledge and skills in L2 (Ovando & Combs, 2018). Students need to incorporate all new knowledge into their previous repertoire of skills and knowledge, regardless of how wide or narrow their schooling experience may have been in their country of origin. This means that even those students who have no formal schooling also have a repertoire of knowledge and skills that can be used as a bridge to higher

meta-cognitive development such as critical thinking. As educators, we understand that teaching is assisting students' performance at the Zone of Proximal Development (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978) and those means of assistance will require differentiated instructional practices in the classroom (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). This also speaks of the importance of having proper instrumentationto assess students who have a wide range of schooling experiences and a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In reference to proper instrumentation, as educators, our goal is to assess in order to assist (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

The survey findings also point to differences in relation to how students perceive the classroom learning environment and their language processes for understanding subject matter as a function of their status as either newcomers or EL general students. The findings suggest that EL newcomers are using cognitive strategies in their first Language (L1) in order to incorporate L1 into the every-day academic activities. Connecting teaching to students' language and experiences may facilitate academic success. These findings on the status of students' use of L1 in the classroom also point to the need for teacher professional development on key linguistic instructional practices relevant to language acquisition processes. This finding demystifies the notion that if educators simply immerse newcomer students in English, they can soon catch up to their English-speaking counterparts in a swim or sink approach. The cognitive demands placed on newcomer students are greater as they face multiple factors including linguistic challenges, level of academic proficiency, and navigating the school educational system. This is also further compounded due to their previous academic background, migration experience (e.g., voluntary or involuntary migration), living in poor urban environments, and other socio-cultural factors.

Thirdly, the study also provides guidance regarding the professional development and training for educators working with EL newcomers. The factor analysis examined the underlying characteristics under which all survey participants agree. Theme 1 (Students' Beliefs and Values) revealed that students are motivated to learn, and they are also aware of their academic needs. Furthermore, they aspire to go to college, but they also need assistance in figuring out how to succeed in school. They also have a positive attitude towards achievement, and they believe that if they work hard, they will succeed. This sense of industry needs to be supported in the learning environment. Theme 2 (Teaching and Learning) revealed good teaching and learning practices that students see as helpful for them in the classroom environment. They perceive teacher's responsiveness and instructional dialogues as effective practices. Furthermore, this theme connects with their view on a supportive learning environment. Under Theme 3 (The Classroom Learning Environment), the results from factor analysis provide guidance on classroom practices in order to engage students through effective teaching and learning practices (e.g., differentiated instruction, targeted instruction, etc.) (Lin, 2015; Ovando & Combs, 2018) as well as effective teaching strategies that may also serves to develop students' sense of belonging through participation, inclusiveness and challenging activities.

8.1 Limitation of the Study

There are several limitations to the finding of this study. First, the sample size for the surveys and the number of focus groups is small. Also, due to the nature of our approach for data collection within two schools, there is no representation from other districts. Therefore, the findings need to be interpreted with caution regarding their limitation for generalizability.

9. Conclusion

EL newcomer students experience a variety of difficulties in their schooling process. These difficulties involve learning processes and interactions that affect students' placement across grade levels and content areas as a function of their limited English proficiency, schooling experience, and socio-cultural background, to name a few.

In urban settings, successful school/classroom programs are those seeking to establish (and capitalize) on the importance of newcomer students' cultural and linguistic diversity. Programs of instruction that are sensitive to cultural and linguistic diversity develop students' academic skills as they interconnect domains of literacy, specific content areas, language, and cognition (Lin, 2015; Rivera et al., 2016). For example, learning higher order vocabulary and higher order thinking is a cognitive process mediated by external cultural tools (Juzwik, Nystrand, Kelly, & Sherry, 2008). Successful programmatic conditions will create successful students and English learners are not the exception. They will thrive and achieve through new opportunities and assistance through new mechanisms of support in their schooling process.

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