The Challenges and Barriers to Academic Success
Immigrant Students Encounter in Primary Grades

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A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements
For the degree of Master of Teaching
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Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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Abstract

This research study focused on the challenges and barriers to academic success that immigrant students encounter in their primary grade class. Additionally, the study investigated what resources and initiatives are available in supporting immigrant students. Qualitative research was conducted by collecting data through semi-structured interviews with two participants. Both participants work as teachers with the Peel District School Board in Brampton. From the findings, it is evident immigrant students continue to experience a number of challenges and barriers to academic success. In particular, the English language persists to be the main challenge. The implications of this study indicate a need for improvements to combat the challenges immigrant students encounter to academic success. Two main recommendations emerged demonstrating firstly, a need for more funding to allocate increased ESL (English as a second language) support time and secondly, training and support to encourage teachers’ effective use of available resources.

Key Words: immigrant students, English language, educational achievement
I wish to acknowledge and thank all the people who have been instrumental to the completion of this research study.

First and foremost, I would like to say a huge thank you to my loving family who has been there for me in so many ways. None of this would have been possible without them; I could not have hoped for better cheerleaders! Their support and belief in me has been unwavering. Thank you also for the continued laughter you have brought to my life. In particular, my mum has been my rock and driving force, always having confidence in my ability to succeed. I love you all so much and always will!!

Second, I would like to thank the amazing teachers who participated in this research study and without whom this study would not have been possible. Their insights, knowledge, experience and time were greatly appreciated.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my professors for all their guidance, feedback and ongoing support. I have learned a lot during the past two years and will implement this throughout my career. Additionally, thank you to my peers who have made our time together enjoyable by sharing their knowledge, experience and good humour, I know I have made life-long friends.

My journey to becoming a teacher has been a rollercoaster, full of ups and downs but I know it has been worth it because I am making a difference. I am looking forward to the next chapter of my life in doing something I absolutely love.
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The Challenges and Barriers to Academic Success
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction to the Research Study

Canada’s population is undoubtedly made up of both Canadians and immigrants. Therefore, it is paramount that Canadian schools not only acknowledge immigrant students but also implement teaching practices that accommodate their needs. Previous research has shown that the challenges immigrant students encounter significantly impact their academic achievement negatively (Gunderson, D’Silva, & Odo, 2012). Even today, immigrant students face challenges and barriers which impede their academic success. This is a recurring problem in education which needs to be further researched and addressed in order to bring about positive change.

I am deeply passionate about addressing diversity issues. It is my priority to investigate the challenges and barriers immigrant students encounter in primary classes from the perspective of teachers. Identifying causes may lead to improvements in current teaching practices to address the needs of immigrant students. Research indicates a lack of data concerning immigrant students (Clarkson, 2008). Hence, it is crucial to conduct research in this field so educators are made more aware of measures to improve practice.

This research study aims to contribute to highlighting and understanding the challenges and barriers immigrant students encounter, the impact this has on their educational achievement and possible recommendations to improve current teaching practices. This issue cannot be ignored or casually touched upon; it needs to be a central focus in research because immigrant students deserve the best education possible, as do all students. Differences should be embraced
and accommodated rather than deemed hindrances. Every student is different and teaching practices need to reflect this. Schools need to eliminate or at least minimize the challenges and barriers which may prevent a certain group of students from succeeding academically.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate and explore the challenges and barriers to success that immigrant students encounter in primary grades. This study is of high importance to the education community because educators work with immigrant students every day. Educators have a vital role in ensuring all students receive the best education possible. However, immigrant students are denied this right as they encounter challenges and barriers to success because of their status as immigrants to Canada. It is undeniably unethical that many immigrant students are unable to achieve their full potential because of the challenges they face; for example, having to learn the English language. Previous research indicates that immigrant students are falling behind academically because of the challenges of learning the English language (Tienda & Haskins, 2011). Immigrant students should not be made to suffer because of the inadequate teaching measures in place. I firmly believe this issue needs to be tackled. More research is needed in order for teachers to better understand immigrant students’ needs more deeply.

Additionally, this study will be instrumental to my own practice as an educator. It will help to improve my teaching choices to better accommodate immigrant students and alleviate some of the challenges and barriers they encounter. This study will allow me to gain a deeper understanding about the teaching profession in relation to the needs of immigrant students. It is my duty as a teacher to be well informed about the challenges and barriers immigrant students encounter. Only then will I be able to collaborate in implementing positive strategies to overcome these challenges and limit the number of barriers immigrant students encounter.
1.2 Research Questions

The goal of my study is to investigate the following key question: According to teachers, what are the challenges and barriers to academic success that immigrant students encounter in their primary grade class? Additionally, my research aims to further explore the following sub-questions: 1) What teaching practices are in place in schools to overcome challenges immigrant students encounter in the primary grades? 2) What would help teachers to overcome the challenges immigrant students encounter and what improvements can be made to current teaching practices? 3) What initiatives have been successfully implemented in schools to overcome challenges immigrant students encounter in primary grades?

1.3 Background of the Researcher

This topic is of importance to me because I am committed to implementing inclusive teaching practices. As an immigrant to Canada, I witnessed first-hand the lack of provisions made available to immigrant students. I have three younger siblings, who all attended Canadian schools. It was concerning to me that two out of the three siblings found it very difficult to adjust to Canadian schooling. This was a disappointing realization as a future educator in Canada. It significantly impacted my siblings’ self-esteem and academic motivation. Two of my siblings were reduced to tears within the first week of going to a Canadian school, thinking they could not succeed. There was a definite lack of accommodations made for my siblings. Instead, they were expected to complete the same work as their peers and fit straight into the classroom as though they had learned exactly what their peers had learned. This negatively impacted my siblings. In particular, I recall one of my siblings refusing to complete the assigned work because she felt she could not do it. This sibling had been an ‘A’ grade student in our home country, England. She had always been confident in her abilities. It was shocking to observe how moving
to the Canadian school system had affected her so detrimentally. This incident highlighted the lack of services and accommodations available to immigrant students to truly meet their needs and successfully help them to integrate into the Canadian school system. This experience is a motivating factor in why I believe it is crucial to investigate the challenges and barriers immigrant students face to be able to truly help them. Teaching is without a doubt a very important job and I want to be thoroughly prepared by conducting this study.

When working in classrooms, my concerns were further heightened. I noticed many immigrant students, whose first language was not English, struggled behind their peers. The few accommodations which were made were: teachers would repeatedly explain the work to students, scribe for them and provide the option of an oral assessment instead of a written one. However, no other strategies were in place to support immigrant students. Through short, informal discussions with educators, these were the only strategies communicated and implemented as support for learners with English as a second language; this clearly needs to be explored further. As an educator, it is my duty to study this in more depth. I am passionate about this topic because it is of significance to ensuring that no child is left behind. All students deserve to reach their full potential whatever their background. I am extremely keen to pursue research regarding this subject to better inform myself as I cannot substitute my own experiences and that of my siblings for all immigrant students. This research will provide me with insights into how I can address the needs of immigrant students.

During my undergraduate degree, I learned the importance of conducting research focused on children and youth. The lives of young people are fascinating and insightful. It is vital to research the lives of young people to learn about issues that arise and improvements that can be made. Children and young people are required to attend school five days a week and spend
most of their time at school; therefore, it is paramount that research is conducted to study current practices and policies within the education sector. Throughout my four years in my undergraduate degree, I learned what a powerful effect the schooling system has on children’s lives. Previous research within this field has not only opened my eyes as an educator but also made me conscious of my teaching practices. Accordingly, my research study is essential to the choices I make as a teacher. Without in-depth investigation into the issues immigrant students encounter, I will have limited knowledge regarding how to best teach a diverse range of students. It is my goal to make inclusion a reality.

1.4 Overview

Chapter 1 includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic and study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedure used in this study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. Chapter 4 identifies the participants in the study and describes the data as it addresses the research question. Chapter 5 includes limitations of the study, conclusions, recommendations for practice, and further reading and study. References and a list of appendixes follow at the end.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

Immigrant students are fast becoming a substantial part of the school population. “In Canada, immigrants make up about 20-25% of school-age children” (Ukasoanya, 2014, p. 150); therefore it is of upmost importance that schools meet the needs of this diverse group of students. Tienda and Haskins (2011) state “large numbers of immigrant children are experiencing serious problems with education” (p. 3), which is concerning. Furthermore, schools are “struggling to meet the unique and often urgent needs of recently arrived immigrant students” (First, 1988, p. 207). It is crucial for schools and educators to recognize the struggles immigrant students experience in order to meet the needs of this population (Garrett & Holcomb, 2005). As will become evident immigrant students encounter many challenges.

Before I proceed to review the current literature, there are a few frequently used terms which I need to define. The term LEP refers to students who are limited English proficient (Vang, 2006), ELL refers to English language learners and ESL stands for English as a second language (Stufft & Brogadir, 2011).

2.1 Challenges Immigrant Students Encounter

There is a strong amount of research which supports my argument that immigrant students encounter challenges within the education system (Bang, Suárez-Orozco, & O’Connor, 2011; Cheng, Wang, Hao, & Shi, 2014; Chu, 2009; Clarkson, 2008; Delores, 1997; First, 1988; Garrett & Holcomb, 2005; Gibson, 1998; Gunderson, D’Silva, & Odo, 2012; Md-Yunus, 2008; Oikonomidoy, 2014; Parker, Rubalcava, & Teruel, 2005; Peterson & Ladky, 2007; Sánchez, 2014; Schoorman, Zainuddin, & Sena, 2011; Schultz & Coleman-King, 2012; Smith-Davis, 2004; Strickland, Keat, & Marinak, 2010; Stufft & Brogadir, 2011; Tienda & Haskins, 2011;
School personnel need to ensure that immigrant students are not at a disadvantage when it comes to academic achievement. Unfortunately, immigrant students are at a disadvantage because of their status as immigrants; they frequently encounter obstacles to academic success. The work by Garrett and Holcomb (2005) and Smith-Davis (2004) outline a number of challenges currently facing immigrant students: overcrowded schools, limited resources, standardized tests, school accountability, lack of preparedness to adequately meet immigrant students’ learning needs (Garrett & Holcomb, 2005), schools are not adequately staffed, language barriers as well as communication barriers are in evidence and there is a lack of understanding of immigrant students’ prior education (Smith-Davis, 2004). All these factors play a role in immigrant students’ academic success. By conducting research on this topic, I will compare and contrast to existing literature the challenges outlined in my research; identifying any progress that has been made or lack thereof and if these challenges are still encountered by immigrant students today. I will build on past research and contribute to this very important topic in the hope of bringing further awareness to the challenges immigrant students encounter.

Strickland et al. (2010) comment, “teachers find their understanding of teaching and learning challenged as they are confronted with such discontinuities as English language limitations, low immigrant achievement, and seemingly low parent involvement in school” (p. 82). Some teachers are overwhelmed and lack experience with immigrant students and their different learning needs, subsequently failing to accommodate the needs of immigrant students to enable this group of students to reach their full potential. Chu (2009) explains “many school districts are not appropriately staffed or equipped to provide comprehensive support to help immigrant students” (p. 71). This is extremely damaging to immigrant students’ academic journey. Without staff who are trained and adequately equipped to teach immigrant students,
immigrant students will remain ‘outsiders’ and their needs will continue to be ignored. Oikonomidoy (2014) clarifies, the challenges immigrant students experience position “them as outsiders with not much possibility for success” (p. 144). Therefore, as much research as necessary needs to be conducted on this topic to bring about awareness of the seriousness of this issue. It is concerning that immigrant students have experienced challenges for decades; many of the challenges identified in 1988 (First, 1988) are still present today (Cheng et al., 2014; Oikonomidoy, 2014; Sánchez, 2014; Ukasoanya, 2014).

Many scholars agree that mastering English is the major challenge immigrant students encounter to academic success (Bang et al., 2011; Cheng et al., 2014; Chu, 2009; Delores, 1997; First, 1988; Garrett & Holcomb, 2005; Gunderson et al., 2012; Parker et al., 2005; Smith-Davis, 2004; Tienda & Haskins, 2011; Vang, 2006). Chu (2009) informs, “the primary challenge that immigrant students encounter is English language” (p. 69). Tienda and Haskins (2011) further explain, “language proficiency is the learning platform for subsequent academic success, closing English proficiency gaps is a necessary . . . condition for eliminating achievement gaps” (p. 14). Immigrant students’ success depends on how well they are able to master the English language, thus positioning the acquisition of English as the major determining factor of an immigrant student’s academic achievement. Without first grasping how to speak, read and write English, immigrant students are unable to comprehend and deconstruct concepts being taught. I will now look at the challenge of learning English as well as other challenges immigrant students encounter in greater detail.

2.1.1 Limited English

In a land in which relatively few citizens can speak or write any language other than English, language is the primary barrier faced by immigrants. Because most recently
arrived immigrants speak little or no English to their children, the home is not a fertile place to improve children's skills in English. (First, 1988, p. 206)

It is extremely difficult for immigrant students who speak little to no English to perform well academically in the first few years of arrival in their new country. Gunderson et al. (2012) explain “immigrant students often struggle in schools where the language of instruction differs from the language spoken at home” (p. 142). Often, immigrant students have little or no prior knowledge of the English language and are in home situations where English is not spoken; thus they struggle when it comes to being placed in a school where the curriculum is taught in English. It becomes a battle for immigrant students when they not only have to learn English but also need to comprehend concepts from the curriculum in English. Delores (1997) confirms,

Learning a new language also may impede academic performance. Even when a child has learned the conversational aspect of a second language, it may take five years, on average, to learn aspects of language related to cognitive and academic functioning. (p. 51)

Smith-Davis (2004) coincides with this view; she states “English language learners require at least five years in which to catch up academically in English, although they may be conversationally fluent in the language within two years of starting to acquire it” (p. 22). This can have a significantly negative impact on an immigrant student who can feel as though they have to play catch up to their native peers. After learning the English language, immigrant students on average take five years to comprehend the material they are being taught in English. Reading, speaking and writing English does not mean immigrant students are able to understand the material they are being taught. This requires further time and effort on the part of immigrant
students. Gunderson et al. (2012) stress that first immigrant students need to become proficient in everyday language communication and then they learn how to become academically language proficient by being able to understand instruction and texts in English. This twofold learning becomes integral for immigrant students to succeed. They must learn both the English language and the curriculum concepts in English at the same time.

Having to deal with learning and mastering the English language can have a detrimental impact on immigrant students’ learning and achievement. Tienda and Haskins (2011) make clear, Children who begin kindergarten with limited proficiency in spoken English fall behind native speakers in both reading and math proficiency; moreover, early achievement gaps widen through primary school and carry over to middle school . . . English mastery is the single most important prerequisite for academic success. (p. 5)

Cheng et al. (2014) agree “immigrant students whose native languages are not English often struggle in their English language learning and consequently, have lower performance” (p. 591). It is important to recognize how crucial the language barrier is to immigrant students’ success. It is no coincidence that this barrier has been mentioned numerous times. Clearly, it is a continuing problem immigrant students encounter. Tienda and Haskins (2011) outline “wide and persistent achievement disparities between these English learners and English-proficient students indicate that schools must address the language, literacy, and academic needs of English learners more effectively” (p. 10). Garrett and Holcomb (2005) inform “many immigrant students become highly frustrated because their learning needs are not being met due to language barriers. Anxiety levels are exacerbated by unreasonable expectations and these expectations explain . . . declines in academic achievement” (p. 49). Immigrant students are unable to learn the
curriculum because they cannot comprehend English instruction. Unrealistic expectations are demanded from immigrant students. These students are penalized academically because they came from a country where they did not learn English.

Chu (2009) recognizes “language proficiency of immigrant students varies with country of origin” (p. 68). Therefore, we cannot categorize immigrant students as one homogenous group because immigrant students have different needs depending on their country of origin. Some immigrant students may come from countries where English is taught and thus have a better understanding of the English language than those who are from countries where English is not a spoken language. This is a very complex issue within schools and needs to be carefully handled. The different experiences immigrant students bring with them to the school setting need to be addressed on an individual basis in order to ensure their needs are being met. Bang et al. (2011) clarify and further expand on this issue, “the challenge of learning English is even greater for those who experienced interrupted or limited formal schooling in their countries of origin” (p. 46). Immigrant students with limited prior schooling find it even more difficult to understand the curriculum and struggle to master English. The lives of immigrant students are complex and the different experiences immigrant students have with mastering English need to be taken into consideration. There is no universal experience when it comes to learning English that is applicable to all immigrant students.

2.1.1.1 Bilingual Education Benefits and Drawbacks

There is bilingual education and English language learner (ELL) services available to immigrant students. ELL or ESL programs are where immigrant students are taken out of the classroom for a short amount of time during the day or week and provided with support to learn the basic foundations of the English language, there is no instruction in their home language
(Stufft & Brogadir, 2011). Bilingual education, on the other hand, “facilitates learning English through instruction in the students’ primary language” (Stufft & Brogadir, 2011, p. 563). However, the focus is on ELL classes rather than bilingual education because English is viewed as the most important language to learn (Clarkson, 2008). When examining the literature, there was little research about ELL services, the focus was on bilingual education.

Among scholars, opinion on bilingual education is divided, some support it and others do not. Gibson (1998) partially supports bilingual education; she explains how American society focuses on English as the dominant language, neglecting to acknowledge the importance of other languages. Too often, immigrant students are expected to transition into an English-only curriculum (Gibson, 1998). Bilingual education nurtures and respects immigrant students’ native language and the English language. Peterson and Ladky (2007) agree that by promoting bilingual education, schools respect students’ mother tongue as an essential part of their lives.

The challenge for immigrant students to learn English without any instruction in their native language can significantly impact their academic achievement. Understanding curricular tasks when they have not yet comprehended English is difficult. First (1988) asserts,

When immigrant students do not receive basic instruction in their native languages, at least until they can become fully proficient in English, their chances of succeeding in school are tragically under cut . . . standard English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs by themselves do not provide the needed support for academic success. (p. 207)

Gibson (1998) emphasizes the move away from bilingual education towards English-only instruction as having a detrimental effect on immigrant students’ academic success. By teaching immigrant students in their mother tongue, they can simultaneously learn the curriculum and also learn English. Sánchez (2014) describes the need for immigrant students to use their home
languages within the school setting to scaffold their learning of English. Otherwise, immigrant students remain at the first stage of learning English and do not comprehend academic tasks until they become proficient in English, which is usually five years after mastering English.

Some scholars (Garrett & Holcomb, 2005; Parker et al., 2005; Smith-Davis, 2004; Stufft & Brogadir, 2011; Vang, 2006) believe bilingual education has too many drawbacks. It is extremely difficult to find bilingual teachers, especially if there are immigrant students who speak a variety of different languages within one school (Stufft & Brogadir, 2011). The shortage of certified bilingual teachers makes it impossible for bilingual education to flourish within many schools (Smith-Davis, 2004). Furthermore, “schools cannot justify hiring a bilingual teacher for only a handful of students” (Garrett & Holcomb, 2005, p. 58). Gibson (1998) explains that bilingual education “not only will slow the process of English acquisition but ultimately retard the child’s educational progress and ultimate access to the mainstream of this society” (p. 616). This oppositional view to bilingual education is also supported by Vang (2006) who claims, bilingual education “sets language-minority students apart from others impedes their education and limits their potential. The content of their language curriculum consists of basic communication needed only for survival; it does not include the language development needed for academic tasks” (p. 21). Immigrant students in bilingual education classrooms are taught how to read and communicate in English but are not taught how to comprehend tasks in English. Parker et al. (2005) explain bilingual education remains a controversial topic because “a common fear being that bilingual education impairs the acquisition of the dominant language as well as overall educational achievement” (p. 72). The concern that bilingual education causes delays in becoming English proficient results in the lack of bilingual education in schools and thus can appear as a challenge to immigrant students who rely solely on instruction in English. However,
Vang (2006) highlights schools that have bilingual education prevent immigrant students from succeeding to ensure funding is still being given to the school;

As students progress from LEP [limited English proficient] to FEP [fluent English proficient] status, the funding is reduced. Thus school administrators have a financial interest in keeping students designated as limited-English proficient . . . This means that they must continue in the bilingual program with its inferior content. (p. 22)

Therefore, bilingual education can cause a number of challenges for immigrant students.

2.1.2 Discrimination and Acculturation

There is a long history of discrimination towards immigrant students, Gibson (1998) outlines in the 1970s there was a lot of hostility towards immigrant students from their teachers and peers. Md-Yunus (2008) claims “teachers and administrators often have lower expectations for immigrant children . . . differences in culture are often considered deficits rather than assets in schools” (p. 316). Immigrant students are labeled incapable and given limited opportunities to succeed. This challenge encountered by immigrant students is raised by numerous scholars in the field (Cheng et al., 2014; First, 1988; Gibson, 1998; Md-Yunus, 2008; Oikonomidoy, 2014; Sánchez, 2014; Strickland et al., 2010; Ukasoya, 2014; Vang, 2006). Ukasoya (2014) explains when immigrant students are labeled as incompetent it can affect their academic performance because they are more prone to conform to such labels. Additionally, an unsupportive environment and rejection of immigrant students by teachers can contribute negatively to immigrant students’ academic performance. Many experience exclusion and avoid participating in class discussions and work (Ukasoya, 2014). Strickland et al. (2010) discovered through teacher interviews that teachers make assumptions about immigrant students
and do not expect much from these students who as a result underperform. This form of discrimination experienced by immigrant students has been an on-going issue for decades. I wish to research if this is still a problem today.

Discrimination within schools influences the type of education immigrant students receive. Vang (2006) situates this discrimination in the context of a ‘second-class’ education;

Countless bilingual and limited-English-proficient students are lagging behind their peers. Minority students are being labeled and treated differently from their classmates. Although equally capable, they are receiving a second-class education . . . schools serving black, Latino, and poor minority students spend as estimated $3,000 less per teacher. In other words, these schools only recruit underpaid, less experienced, and newer teachers to teach minority students. (p. 20)

This significantly puts immigrant students at a disadvantage. They are expected to do poorly compared to their native peers and are provided with little help or resources to improve their chances. Instead, immigrant students receive lower funding when it comes to teachers. Vang (2006) continues to describe how immigrant students are taught low content in comparison to their peers because of “the attitude that non-English-speaking students are not capable of the same academic achievement as native speakers” (p. 20). This view is supported by Cheng et al. (2014) who confirm immigrant students “are seen as a problem or challenge for teachers to teach” (p. 590).

Often educators confuse limited English with a learning disability (Chu, 2009). Just because immigrant students speak a different language and are not proficient in English, does not mean they have a learning disability. This misdiagnosis deeply impacts immigrant students who
are placed in special education classes and not able to reach their full potential. Schoorman et al. (2011) emphasize, the misdiagnosis and over-diagnosis of ELLs in special education is well documented and there is a common confusion between a language difference and a learning disability. This relates closely to Garrett and Holcomb’s (2005) view that “too often educators attribute lack of English proficiency with a lack of intellectual ability” (p. 55). Immigrant students experience discrimination and become labelled as incapable because of their status as immigrants and lack of English proficiency; subsequently, affecting their academic success.

Acculturation is adapting to your new country but still being able to practice your home country’s values (Gibson, 1998). However, many immigrant students find it challenging to acculturate because they are expected to abandon their cultural ways in order to succeed academically (Gibson, 1998). Ukasoanya (2014) explains that if a newcomer immigrant student does not conform to the cultural norms of the host country, they are often stigmatized and not academically able to succeed as they do not possess the norms deemed successful in students. However, those students who assimilate fully into the host country’s culture still face problems to success. As Gibson (1998) describes, they are unable to communicate with their families in their native language because they have assimilated to only speak English and thus are denied the knowledge their families have to offer as well as the emotional support needed to succeed. It is frequently assumed that in order to be academically successful, immigrant students need to master English without any emphasis on remaining bilingual. It is a double-edged sword, whether immigrant students assimilate or acculturate, either way they face challenges to success.

### 2.1.3 Funding

A lot of schools serving immigrant students in the United States are underfunded because the schools affected by budget cuts are those in poorer areas where immigrants settle (Tienda &
Haskins, 2011). Garrett and Holcomb (2005) affirm because of lack of funding, there are not enough certified teachers and resources to accommodate the needs of ELLs. This view is further supported by Chu (2009) who believes schools need to better allocate funds towards the needs of immigrant students because there is an uneven relationship whereby there is a shortage of resources but a lot of ELLs. Stafft and Brogadir (2011) also agree there is a need for funding to implement programs that accommodate ELLs. Immigrant students settle in the poorest schools “short on resources, poorly staffed, badly maintained, and over-crowded” (First, 1988, p. 207). This is clearly a challenge immigrant students encounter to success.

It is important to realize the above literature is focused on funding in the United States rather than funding in Canada. My research will help to investigate whether school funding is a challenge immigrant students face in Ontario, Canada.

2.1.4 Parental Involvement and Homework

Garrett and Holcomb (2005) assert “it has been well established that family involvement in education increases student achievement” (p. 55) and Md-Yunus (2008) supports this view, “students’ home environments play a substantial role in academic performance” (p. 315). It is vital, therefore, that immigrant parents are involved in their child’s schooling. However, the challenge facing many immigrant students is their parents are not actively involved. Chu (2009) demonstrates expenditures for parental outreach is low for immigrant students compared to their peers. Strickland et al. (2010) emphasize “schools and teachers who build relationships with each child and his or her family encourage learning” (p. 99). Yet, First (1988) found “schools often seem unwilling to seek partnerships with parents and community organizations in immigrant neighborhoods. Sometimes they even discourage these groups from becoming involved” (p. 210). Strickland et al. (2010) further elaborate that teachers in their study expressed they felt
disconnected from immigrant parents because of their limited English. This discrimination based on English proficiency and immigrant status disadvantages immigrant families when it comes to their child’s academic success. Tienda and Haskins (2011) highlight the fact that immigrant parents who are not yet citizens cannot vote and have little say in decisions affecting their children’s lives. Therefore, it is essential for parents to be involved in the school environment where they have an input in decisions affecting their child’s academic success.

There are a number of factors which prevent parental involvement: language barriers, acculturative stress of learning to adapt to the new society, parental fear of embarrassment and teachers’ lack of understanding (Smith-Davis, 2004). It is important to realize that the English-only curriculum “while perhaps helping students to read and write in English, also reinforced the division between home and school for non-English speaking parents” (Peterson & Ladky, 2007, p. 895). This significantly impacts the help and support immigrant students are able to get at home because of language barriers. Peterson and Ladky (2007) confirm “language itself is a barrier to successful parent involvement. Some parents lack confidence in their abilities to support their children in school work that uses a language they are struggling to learn” (p. 884).

Homework completion has a positive effect on academic achievement (Bang et al., 2011). However, many immigrant students do not complete their homework due to lack of help available and consequently do not have this extra time to practice skills that could improve their success at school. According to Bang et al. (2011) there are a number of reasons why immigrant students may be at risk for not completing homework: they are unfamiliar with the types of homework and homework expectations in their new schooling context, have limited or no preparation for the homework task, limited English prevents them from understanding and completing the homework, live in poverty and thus unable to find time and space to complete the
homework due to responsibilities within the household, limited access to resources and no parental assistance. Stufft and Brogadir (2011) coincide with Bang et al. (2011) and comment on how financial constraints position immigrant parents in jobs with long hours where they are unable to find the time to be actively involved in supporting their child with homework or in school events such as open evenings. Furthermore, the limited formal education and restricted knowledge immigrant parents have of the education system in their new country can hinder their chances of helping their children with homework tasks (Bang et al., 2011). Parker et al. (2005) note this considerably impacts the opportunities immigrant students have to practice homework with parental support compared to their non-immigrant peers who have ongoing parental guidance.

Homework completion is seen as a determinant of a student’s academic success; Bang et al. (2011) stress that teachers often use homework as a measure to determine a student’s grades. As mentioned above, there are a number of challenges preventing immigrant students from completing homework and subsequently they may get penalized for incompletion, affecting their academic achievement. It is important to note the research by Bang et al. (2011) is focused on adolescent students in high school. Further research is needed to investigate whether homework incompletion has a negative impact on children’s academic achievement in the primary grades.

Garrett and Holcomb (2005) indicate that some immigrant parents are involved in ensuring their child succeeds academically, “Asian parents greatly influence their young as they pressure their children to achieve academically” (p. 55). This parental involvement from Asian parents can have a positive influence on Asian students’ achievement as their parents expect success from their children and these children thrive under the expectations. However, this pressure from parents can be a challenge within itself that immigrant students experience.
2.2 Academic Performance

The following authors (Cheng et al., 2014; Clarkson, 2008; Garrett & Holcomb, 2005; Gibson, 1998; Tienda & Haskins, 2011; Ukasoanya, 2014) believe that immigrant students perform well in academics despite the challenges they face. Gibson (1998) confirms in the 1970s, immigrant students performed better academically than their native-born peers. The study conducted by Cheng et al. (2014) show similar trends today where White and Asian immigrant students academically outperformed or performed as well as their non-immigrant peers in mathematics. Furthermore, Clarkson (2008) asserts “immigrant students are more [academically] successful than their domestic minority counterparts” (p. 24). Tienda and Haskins (2011) also agree immigrant students “often outperform their native peers in school” (p. 8). Garrett and Holcomb (2005) coincide with this view and state “newcomers are racking up high grades despite language barriers, overwhelming poverty, and personal hardship” (p. 54). These studies express that although immigrant students encounter challenges they are still able to not only perform well but also sometimes exceed the performance of their non-immigrant peers.

Other authors (Bang et al., 2011; First, 1988; Gunderson et al., 2012; Schultz & Coleman-King, 2012), however, suggest immigrant students perform at a low level in academics due to the challenges they encounter. Bang et al. (2011) claim immigrant students “lag behind their native-born English-speaking peers in academic achievement” (p. 26). An immigrant student is more likely to have barriers blocking their route to academic success as demonstrated by Gunderson et al. (2012) who declare that students living in poor areas, which are usually immigrant families, are prone to having lower academic achievement. According to Schultz and Coleman-King (2012), the poor academic performance observed among immigrant students is due to their desire to participate being “hampered by their lack of language skills and familiarity
with school norms” (p. 507). Furthermore, as First (1988) points out, immigrant students “are learning a second language, adjusting to a new culture, or recovering from emotional trauma” and may need longer than nine months to understand the work required to pass but instead are labelled as failures because they are unable to perform well on tests and assignments within the nine month timeframe (p. 208). The authors cited here believe that the challenges immigrant students encounter lead to lower academic performance.

The divided opinion among scholars is valid as Chu (2009) demonstrates it is difficult to argue whether immigrant students perform well or not because there is limited data specifically on immigrant students’ academic performance, rather immigrants are grouped with their native peers by ethnicity and subsequently academic achievement data is reported by ethnicity. Further research is needed to establish immigrant students’ academic performance.

2.3 Suggested Recommendations to Combat Challenges

Some of the literature (Bang et al., 2011; Chu, 2009; Clarkson, 2008; First, 1988; Garrett & Holcomb, 2005; Peterson & Ladky, 2007; Smith-Davis, 2004; Stufft & Brogadir, 2011) recommended solutions to combat the challenges immigrant students encounter. Chu (2009) and First (1988) agree that more funding needs to be allocated towards meeting the needs of immigrant students. There also needs to be more recruitment and training of bilingual teachers as well as hiring more foreign-born teachers (First, 1988). Smith-Davis (2004) is in agreement and confirms the need for specialists in schools who can help teachers design effective instruction for immigrant students in addition to teacher exchanges from different countries. Stufft and Brogadir (2011) verify staff development programs are needed that focus on effective instruction for ELLs. Furthermore, parental involvement needs to be at the centre of improvements for immigrant students, as Strufft and Brogadir (2011) outline there needs to be translation services
and workshops for parents to get involved in their child’s schooling. Peterson and Ladky (2007) coincide with this view making clear principals and teachers need cultural awareness training and need to integrate “bilingual and multicultural materials in regular classroom instruction” (p. 885). Additionally, Garrett and Holcomb (2005) raise the important point to “include a special statement in policy handbooks that specifically supports immigrant students with limited English ability” (p. 59).

Bang et al. (2011) made some very valuable recommendations in regards to promoting homework completion among immigrant students; they outlined teachers could “have students start their homework in class, where they can readily access help from teachers and peers” (p. 47). Furthermore, “principals and community leaders can work together to organize and systematize after-school programs . . . where immigrant students can receive assistance with homework . . . and be assured of having a quiet, secure place to do homework” (Bang et al., 2011, p. 48). After all, as mentioned above, homework completion has a positive effect on overall academic achievement.

It is vital to acknowledge that student achievement data is commonly reported by ethnicity, subsequently negating “a clear understanding about the achievement of immigrant students” (Clarkson, 2008, p. 20). In order to uncover the unique challenges immigrant students encounter, there needs to be data reported specifically on immigrant students; they cannot be grouped by ethnicity (Clarkson, 2008). Clarkson (2008) asserts, “school districts and reporting agencies [need to] disaggregate achievement data to also include the academic performance of immigrant populations. Only then can the unique academic needs of this special population begin to be addressed” (p. 23). It is concerning there is a lack of data precisely focused on immigrant
students’ academic achievement. My research will contribute to the collection of data explicitly on immigrant students and their academic achievement.

2.4 Filling a Gap in the Literature

The majority of the literature examined focused on schools in the United States (Bang et al., 2011; Cheng et al., 2014; Chu, 2009; Clarkson, 2008; Delores, 1997; First, 1988; Garrett & Holcomb, 2005; Gibson, 1998; Md-Yunus, 2008; Oikonomidoy, 2014; Sánchez, 2014; Schoorman et al., 2011; Schultz & Coleman-King, 2012; Smith-Davis, 2004; Strickland et al., 2010; Stufft & Brogadir, 2011; Tienda & Haskins, 2011; Vang, 2006). Only three of the authors’ studies (Gunderson et al., 2012; Peterson & Ladky, 2007; Ukasoanya, 2014) were located in Canada; therefore I hope my research will draw some insights on this topic in Canada and more specifically Ontario. Furthermore, much of the literature was about adolescents in high schools (Bang et al., 2011; Cheng et al., 2014; Delores, 1997; First, 1988; Garrett & Holcomb, 2005; Gibson, 1998; Gunderson et al., 2012; Md-Yunus, 2008; Oikonomidoy, 2014; Schultz & Coleman-King, 2012; Stufft & Brogadir, 2011; Tienda & Haskins, 2011; Vang, 2006). The only study focused specifically on the primary grades was conducted by Peterson and Ladky (2007). There is a gap in the literature to focus more directly on immigrant students in the primary grades and I hope to contribute to this field of research.

I noticed many of the articles (Cheng et al., 2014; Chu, 2009; Clarkson, 2008; Md-Yunus, 2008; Parker et al., 2005; Peterson & Ladky, 2007; Schoorman et al., 2011; Smith-Davis, 2004; Strickland et al., 2010; Stufft & Brogadir, 2011; Tienda & Haskins, 2011; Vang, 2006) when referring to ‘immigrants’ broadly included first, second and third generation immigrants in their studies. I, however, want to specifically focus on first-generation immigrants who have moved from another country to Canada because each generation of immigrants experience
different challenges. Although I realize that first-generation immigrants cannot be categorized as one homogenous group as they have different experiences, I want to particularly focus in on this group for my research as I observe there is a lack of literature focused solely on this group of immigrants.

By conducting my research study, I will be able to compare and contrast the data collected with the current literature on this topic. I will also be able to identify any patterns that occur regarding trends or changes over the years about the challenges and barriers immigrant students encounter.
3.0 Procedure

Qualitative research involves a review of relevant literature and face-to-face interviews. My decision to conduct qualitative research was highly influenced by my undergraduate degree. During my four years as an undergraduate, I conducted a number of small-scale research projects that focused on the importance of qualitative research. I learned that qualitative research is integral to hearing the voices of participants. Qualitative research improves knowledge within a field and can provide recommendations for improvement by listening to those who have experience in the field (Collingridge & Gantt, 2008). My focus in this study was to hear what educators thought about the challenges and barriers immigrant students encounter. I believe it is not only valuable but also necessary in order to move forward and create positive change. After all, it is educators who teach immigrant students and therefore research needs to acknowledge current educators’ thoughts to make progress in the field. Creswell (2013) highlights the importance of qualitative research, indicating that this type of research allows for a detailed investigation of the topic at hand and empowers participants to express their thoughts. I firmly considered qualitative research as appropriate and beneficial for my study. This is why I had face-to-face interviews with two teachers.

Case studies are an invaluable research method in studying people and programs in education (Stake, 1995). I chose to conduct a small scale qualitative study that incorporated some elements of the case study approach. An element of the case study approach particularly suited to my study was that it allowed the researcher to look at an educational situation in-depth. Additionally, the focus of the case study approach is to enable the voices of participants to be heard rather than participants just being described as informants; participants are actively
involved by providing their thoughts which are directly used in data collection and analysis (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000). This is extremely important within the field of education because educators’ views need to be heard in order to ensure best teaching practices, as educators are the ones dealing with the issues on a daily basis. Educators work with immigrant students and their insights into the prevalence of challenges and barriers is valuable. The case study approach illustrates an issue and provides details about the case which was extremely useful to my study in the education sector (Creswell, 2013). I investigated details about the challenges and barriers immigrant students encounter and put this issue at the forefront of education to contribute to further research in this area. My research study was geographically case bound in the Brampton area, a city populated with many immigrant students.

3.1 Instruments of Data Collection

In this study, informal semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data. Semi-structured interviews allow opportunities for participants to share their experiences (Creswell, 2013). There is no right or wrong answers. The use of open-ended questions does not lead the participant to a certain answer but instead provides the participant with the freedom to express their thoughts on the subject. Additionally, it allows participants to bring new aspects to the research question that the researcher may have not thought about. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to be spontaneous with their questions by posing new questions that may arise during the interview in response to the participant’s response. As well as this, semi-structured interviews ensure the researcher is prepared with interview questions related to the research question to keep the interview on topic. By interviewing two educators, I was able to elicit information about my research study and gain answers to my research question. My research question required participants to use their knowledge and experience in sharing the
challenges and barriers they have observed immigrant students encountering. Interviews allow participants to share this kind of information, whereas a survey or questionnaire would not give me in the in-depth data I need about participants’ experiences. Coppock (2011) clarifies why interviews are a vital component of research as power relations exist between the researcher and participants, whereby the researcher is able to make assumptions about the participants and therefore interviews are needed for participants to express their views on the topic. Interviews are very important in eliciting individuals’ opinions. They empower participants to share their perspectives rather than the researcher making assumptions through completed surveys or questionnaires as there is two-way dialogue in interviews where participants have the opportunity to clarify their thoughts.

I decided not to do focus group interviews and instead opted for individual interviews because I did not want the teachers feeling uncomfortable sharing their thoughts with other teachers. I wanted to avoid my participants feeling apprehensive to participate as they might have felt judged by others and thus I tried my best to create a comfortable atmosphere with one-on-one interviews. I used audacity audio recorder on my laptop and had a pen and notepad handy for notes during the interviews.

3.2 Participants

In the following section, I will review the sampling criteria, sampling procedure and participants’ backgrounds.

3.2.1 Sampling Criteria

In preparing to recruit participants for this study, I established the following criteria. My first criterion was that participants must have a minimum of five years teaching experience. In order to gain as much information as possible about the challenges and barriers immigrant
students encounter I needed to interview teachers who had been working in the education sector for many years. My second criterion was that teachers must work in the Peel Region, specifically in Brampton as this city is populated with many immigrant students. Finally, I required participants to have experience working with the primary grades from kindergarten to Grade 3 as my research question specifically focused on the primary grades.

3.2.2 Sampling Procedure

I relied on convenience sampling to recruit participants as I had existing contacts and networks in the field of education. I chose to contact my mentor teachers for recruitment purposes because they both worked at schools in Brampton, where I wished to conduct my interviews because it is populated with immigrant students. Hence, teachers in Brampton were more likely to have experience working with immigrant students and would be better equipped to answer my research question and provide invaluable insights.

I contacted my mentor teachers from teaching practices and provided them with an overview of my research study and participant criteria. I asked them if they would be interested in participating and to distribute information about my research study to teachers they believed also fulfilled the criteria and would be interested in participating. I realized the ethical issues of coercing individuals into participating and therefore I provided my information rather than asked my mentor teachers to provide me with possible participants’ information. This ensured that teachers were volunteering to participate rather than feeling pressurized to participate.

3.2.3 Participant Biographies

I have chosen the pseudonyms Lisa and Katie to refer to the participants. Lisa and Katie both work in the Peel District School Board in Brampton at the same school. They are both full-time Ontario certified teachers. Both are white and were born in Canada.
Lisa has been a teacher for sixteen and a half years. She has taught at four schools during her teaching career and has been at her current school for fourteen years. Lisa has taught grades one through to five and has worked in the school library. She taught kindergarten only during practice teaching. She currently has four immigrant students in her grade three/four split class. Lisa had been out of the classroom for three years working in the school library.

Katie has been teaching for ten years and nine of those years were spent teaching at the current school she is at. At the beginning of her teaching career, Katie taught at two other schools. She has taught grades one, three, four and five. Katie prefers teaching the primary grades. She is now teaching kindergarten for the first time. An immigrant student from Vietnam was recently enrolled into Katie’s classroom who speaks little English.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

I transcribed the interviews in order to be able to analyze the data collected. After transcribing the interviews, I coded the data by reading and rereading the transcribed interviews. I highlighted important quotes and common themes using different coloured highlighters to identify similarities, differences and trends. I also made notes while doing this. Later, I compared the themes that emerged from my data to my literature review. I identified any trends or changes that occurred in comparison to my data and literature review. Furthermore, I looked at null data to discover what the participants did not speak about in relation to my research study and why this mattered.

After conducting the interviews, I proceeded to listen to the audio recordings. It was hard for me to pay attention during the interviews because I was concentrating on making sure the interview was recording well, I was asking all my interview questions and any questions that
came to mind I was jotting down ready to ask. Therefore, it was beneficial to go back afterwards and listen to the interviews.

I then transcribed the interviews. This was a long process which took several hours. I decided to include ‘uhm’ and ‘urr’ in the transcriptions as the participants used these utterances frequently and they may be helpful to my analysis. After transcribing, I read the transcriptions through. I then listened to the interviews again and made any adjustments that were required to the transcripts.

I decided to use the following technique in organizing my interview data: codes – categories – themes (Saldana 2008). This simple technique allowed me to identify specific codes within the transcripts that stood out as valuable data, connect various codes into categories and observe what themes arose from the categories created. This was an excellent way to understand the data collected and was helpful as I worked on chapter four. The three-step process was efficient and effective. Saldana (2008) highlights the importance of successful coding in order to analyze the data. Without coding and categorizing the data first, there is a lack of understanding about what patterns have occurred in the interviews.

Saldana’s (2008) approach of descriptive and In Vivo codes were both an appropriate and efficient coding choice for me. I read and re-read the transcripts, making notes and highlighting key words and sentences. This then enabled me to identify relevant descriptive and In Vivo codes. By using descriptive codes, I was able to summarize sentences with few words but still capture the essence of the passage. This meant easier viewing when trying to create categories and subsequently was invaluable when I established themes. Additionally, I used a lot of In Vivo codes because much of what the participants said translated well into codes. I did not need to replace these codes into my own words and felt that by using the participants’ words it was a
more powerful encapsulation of the data. By putting these codes into a table, I was better able to make connections between codes and establish categories. As Saldana outlines, “one of the coder’s primary goals is to find these repetitive patterns . . . as documented in the data” (2008, p. 5). The codes allowed me to explore what patterns had formed and thus develop categories. Being able to explore the patterns that emerged in the data has been extremely useful in establishing themes.

### 3.4 Ethical Review Procedures

I followed the ethical review approval procedures for the Master of Teaching program. Participants were fully informed about the research study and their questions answered. I got informed consent from the participants by having them read and sign the consent form. I made clear that they could withdraw from the study at any time without reason. I honoured participants’ privacy by storing data on a password protected laptop and will destroy the data after 5 years. Furthermore, I assigned participants a pseudonym so they remained anonymous and I did not include any identifying markers related to their schools to ensure confidentiality. Interviews took place outside of school hours.

Participants were invited to proof-read transcripts and the research paper to make sure I interpreted them accurately. Participants could retract any statements they wished to from the transcript or research paper. I provided participants with a copy of the transcribed interviews and research paper. Member checking increased my credibility and authenticity as I ensured the data collected was correct. There were no known risks to participation in this study.
3.5 Limitations

Given the small scope of this research study, the data collected represented two teachers’ experiences and thus was limited. More participants could have provided a variety of views and experiences. It could also have allowed for more data to be collected on the topic. The results of this study could not be generalized and applied to the whole population as the study was conducted in Brampton, which may differ to other areas in Ontario. Neither could this study be generalized to represent all of Brampton. The study does not stand in for the challenges and barriers all immigrant students encounter and different results may occur from different teachers even within Brampton. This research was limited to two case studies on two teachers in Brampton.

The research study lacked student perspective as students were unable to participate in the study due to ethical reasons of obtaining consent from vulnerable persons; thus I interviewed teachers instead. As a result, my study was very limited as students were not able to voice themselves what they believe are the challenges and barriers they face as immigrant students. After all, these students are experts on this issue as they are the ones who experience the challenges and barriers. Alderson makes clear that, “children are the primary source of knowledge about their views and experiences” (2008, p. 287). This study lacked the first-hand views and experiences of immigrant students and instead relied on the opinions of teachers. Furthermore, James argues the importance of children having opportunities to be heard, she says “giving voice to children is not simply or only about letting children speak; it is about exploring the unique contribution to our understanding of and theorizing about the social world that children’s perspectives can provide” (2010, p. 262). This study neglected children to the right to participate by excluding them as possible participants. Children’s participation in research is
significant to understanding the world from a child’s perspective and I acknowledge the flaws within this research study.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined that I conducted a small scale qualitative study which included some elements of the case study approach. I detailed the importance of semi-structured interviews and why I used semi-structured interviews to collect data. I established the criteria participants must have in order to participate in this study and made clear that I used convenience sampling. I summarized the procedure I used for data analysis. Lastly, I explained the ethical review procedures I followed and considered the limitations of this study. In the next chapter, I report the research findings and explain the main themes that emerged during data analysis.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter, the research findings of the two interviews I conducted with Lisa and Katie are presented. Lisa and Katie work in the Peel District School Board and have been teaching for over ten years; they have both worked with immigrant students and continue to do so. The aim of the interviews was to gain deeper insight into my research question: according to teachers, what are the challenges and barriers to academic success that immigrant students encounter in their primary grade class? Additionally, my purpose was to collect data relevant to my sub-questions outlined in Chapter 1. Five themes emerged from the interviews: 1) Language as the Main Challenge, 2) Other Challenges Immigrant Students Encounter, 3) Differences between Kindergarten and Grade Three, 4) Support, Resources and Initiatives Available, and 5) Suggested Recommendations to Support Immigrant Students. These five themes are used to organize the data presented in this chapter and sub-headings are included to provide further clarification about each theme.

4.1 Theme 1: Language as the Main Challenge

Lisa and Katie found language to be the main challenge immigrant students encountered at school. This reinforced the literature review in Chapter 2, where many scholars emphasized that mastering English was the major challenge encountered by immigrant students to academic success (Bang et al., 2011; Cheng et al., 2014; Chu, 2009; Delores, 1997; First, 1988; Garrett & Holcomb, 2005; Gunderson et al., 2012; Parker et al., 2005; Smith-Davis, 2004; Tienda & Haskins, 2011; Vang, 2006). Many immigrant students come from countries where English is not the spoken language and thus have to learn English when they come to Canada on top of learning new cultural expectations. In Canadian schools, students are required to show their learning in
either English or French. Therefore, immigrant students must learn English or French in order to succeed academically.

4.1.1 Fluency and Understanding

It was interesting that Lisa and Katie further elaborated on how language is the main challenge without any prompting. Both mentioned how two-fold learning occurs, where immigrant students are simultaneously learning to speak English fluently as well as understanding academically. Lisa explained:

Sometimes a child and it makes it more difficult, a child can speak English well and urr so you think that they’re understanding but it’s always .. or often sometimes the nuances of the language or even though they can speak English well, they don’t necessarily understand what .. what exactly they’re saying or what the instructions that you’re giving them are. So language is a barrier not just because, not just verbally but even the understanding of the language.

Katie agreed with this view as she observed similar experiences. In particular, Katie shared a recent observation she made with a new immigrant student in her kindergarten class; “she’s not understanding.” Many immigrant students struggle through this battle of learning and understanding English. Lisa and Katie’s experiences align with Gunderson et al. (2012) who wrote immigrant students have to become proficient in everyday language communication as well as academically language proficient. As Lisa pointed out above, it is difficult when a child can speak English fluently because many educators assume that child understands. However, in reality “English language learners require at least five years in which to catch up academically in English, although they may be conversationally fluent in the language” (Smith-Davis, 2004, p. 22). In the interview, Lisa talked a lot about how she felt this to be the hardest thing for both
students and teachers because teachers often do not consciously realize that immigrant students are catching up academically in English. Lisa’s conversation related well to the literature review focused on the challenge of limited English.

When Katie spoke about language as the main challenge experienced by immigrant students, she commented on how she felt it significantly impacted the communication between peers. Katie expressed immigrant students often do not participate in class discussions due to the language challenge. She observed:

If you’re not understanding what’s being said, then you have a hard time engaging in that conversation. So anything in math or anything that we do on the carpet, they’re not putting up their hand because they’re having trouble understanding what I’m saying. And then even if they do understand, they’re nervous that their English isn’t good enough to give an answer. That their answer might be wrong and they might be embarrassed.

The many factors that arise due to the language challenge affect immigrant students’ academic success. Katie’s comment “communication is key in everything” really resonated with me. Many immigrant students are unable to communicate verbally and through written English which can cause them to fall behind academically as discussed in Chapter 2 by many scholars (Bang et al., 2011; First, 1988; Gunderson et al., 2012; Schultz & Coleman-King, 2012). Much of what was discussed during the interviews corresponded to the literature review. The data confirmed my understanding that language is a powerful challenge and can lead to subsequent challenges experienced by many immigrant students.

4.1.2 Immigration from Different Countries

When asked about what countries the majority of the immigrant students in their classes are from, both interviewees responded mainly countries in Asia such as India, Pakistan, China
and Vietnam. They also said they had taught students from Jamaica and a few from England and Scotland. The major difference they noticed between students who emigrated from English speaking countries versus non-English speaking countries was the language challenge. Lisa recounted an experience she had with a student who emigrated from Scotland, describing how the student was able to recognize Scottish words that were not used in Canadian English and communicate that with Lisa. The student did not have difficulty adapting to the Canadian English because most words were the same. Lisa commented how, on the other-hand, students from non-English speaking countries are starting from scratch with the language. Katie expressed a similar view that immigrant students have a totally different experience based on whether they know English or not. Furthermore, Katie noticed a student from England was able to assimilate into the classroom because she knew English and “the expectations were very similar to what she’s had” before in England. This data reflected that immigrant students have different experiences and cannot be homogenous. Teachers need to acknowledge that immigrant students encounter challenges but they also need to treat each student as an individual and address each student’s individual needs.

4.2 Theme 2: Other Challenges Immigrant Students Encounter

When asked what other challenges and barriers immigrant students encounter, Lisa and Katie interestingly both spoke about the type of learning that occurs in Canada versus the country of origin, how being unable to make friends negatively affects academic success and lastly, the pressure of parents expecting perfection from their immigrant children. Lisa also added the role of the teacher as a challenge but as you will see below did not provide much detail about why she considered it a challenge for immigrant students.
It was surprising that Lisa and Katie did not mention the following challenges highlighted in the literature review in Chapter 2. Neither discussed bilingual education, discrimination, acculturation, funding and the effects of homework incompletion on immigrant students’ academic success. Furthermore, both did not talk about the constraints put on immigrant parents which prevent them from actively supporting their children with school work. This was discussed in great depth in the literature review. Instead the two teachers focused on parent involvement in terms of the pressure put on students as a challenge. Questions are raised as to why the participants did not address these challenges in their interviews. The null data regarding funding in particular makes me wonder if the school Lisa and Katie were at had sufficient funding for immigrant students or whether they found it a taboo topic to discuss. Also, the lack of data collected about bilingual education in the interviews poses whether bilingual education is a focus for immigrant students today.

4.2.1 Type of Learning and the Role of the Teacher

Lisa and Katie spoke about how many immigrant students do rote learning in their countries of origin and then come to Canada where the focus is on inquiry-based, problem-solving learning. Katie explained rote learning as “you sit at your desk and this is what you’re learning and you copy it . . . so there’s not a lot of talking . . . self-teaching, exploring.” Lisa and Katie both believe Canadian schools are doing less and less rote learning so immigrant students are now having to adjust to the learning style in the Canadian school system. Lisa termed it, “there’s a whole different philosophy of education” which immigrant students need to adapt to. Surprisingly, when I carried out my literature review I did not come across this challenge of rote learning versus inquiry-based, problem solving learning. Clearly, Lisa and Katie believe it to be a challenge that immigrant students encounter. Further studies are needed to identify whether this
is a wide-spread challenge experienced by many immigrant students. I am wondering why this challenge was not mentioned in the literature I examined. There could be many reasons as to why, such as this challenge does not occur often among immigrant students. However, both participants in this research study deemed it to be of importance. Future research will possibly answer questions that have been left unanswered in terms of rote learning versus inquiry-based, problem-solving learning as this is a fairly new initiative within schools.

When asked about what other challenges immigrant students encounter, Lisa replied “there’s a different perception of the role of the teacher.” She went on to discuss that some immigrant parents think teachers are the disciplinarians who are supposed to reinforce the rules expected at home because that is the role of the teacher in their country of origin. Lisa said that many of her teacher colleagues had similar experiences with immigrant parents. However, Lisa did not elaborate on how this affects immigrant students or how this is a challenge to immigrant students’ academic success. It is worthy to note that Katie did not mention this at all during the interview.

4.2.2 Making Friends

None of the literature focused on friendship as a challenge immigrant students experienced to academic success but Katie deemed this a significant challenge. She reflected on how she had observed many immigrant students found it difficult to make friends because of the language challenge, especially in the junior grades. She commented on an experience involving a grade four student she had taught, explaining “a student in grade four who came spoke very little English, and making and maintaining a friendship was hard for them because they didn’t know how to engage and at that age it’s harder.” She elaborated that in kindergarten and the lower grades immigrant students can rely on play to make friends, whereas in the junior grades the
focus is on social interactions which puts immigrant students at a disadvantage because they are still learning the language, social cues and what is culturally acceptable. In contrast, play may not require or rely on conversations so immigrant students may be more inclined to join in. Katie believed that as a result, immigrant students’ academic success was impacted in terms of low self-esteem and self-worth which affected students’ in-class work as they were worrying about recess.

Lisa, on the other hand, had observed that immigrant students were able to make friends pretty quickly. She said:

I haven’t really had a lot of experiences where language has been such a barrier that the kids don’t make friends. They usually, you know maybe for a day or two they have urmm some issues but then as soon as kids know and they’re kind and they know well you’re new and maybe that’s because it’s elementary school . . . they want to include everybody.

It was interesting to compare the two different viewpoints. Lisa mentioned how the mentality of the students at the school she is working at is to “gravitate to someone new and try and pull them in and include them” and that she did not know what the experience was like at other schools. Even though, Katie works at the exact same school as Lisa she did not have the same opinion. Instead she extensively spoke about making friends as a major challenge experienced by immigrant students. It was eye-opening to reflect on the two different experiences and realize how even within the same school teachers can have different interpretations. Lisa and Katie had opposite views on this subject but agreed having friends impacted immigrant students’ academic success.
4.2.3 Parent Expectations

Lisa and Katie identified parent expectations as a challenge immigrant students encountered. Lisa explained many immigrant students feel the need to always produce work that is perfect because their parents expect perfection. There were many occasions where Lisa had discussions with immigrant parents, advising them to support their child in a positive way rather than expecting perfection as students then become afraid to do things wrong. Katie also commented that she felt immigrant parents put more pressure on their children to do well and achieve high grades. This aligns with the research conducted by Garrett and Holcomb (2005) who found some immigrant parents such as “Asian parents greatly influence their young as they pressure their children to achieve academically” (p. 55). Although this research finding by Garrett and Holcomb is problematic, it corresponds to the data collected in my interviews.

Except Garrett and Holcomb, most of the literature I examined did not discuss the high expectations that immigrant parents had and the subsequent impact on students’ academic success. Instead, the literature focused on teachers discriminating against immigrant students by having low expectations. Md-Yunus (2008) claims “teachers and administrators often have lower expectations for immigrant children . . . differences in culture are often considered deficits rather than assets in schools” (p. 316). Interestingly, this was not discussed during the interviews with Lisa and Katie. There could be many reasons as to why they did not speak about teacher discrimination. It is also important to comprehend that participants do not include everything in interviews due to personal preferences and time constraints. Additionally, discrimination is a sensitive topic which many feel uncomfortable talking about. Also, Lisa and Katie may not have considered discrimination as a challenge because of the experiences they had.
In relation to parent expectations, Katie continued to explain that many immigrant parents focused on their children doing extra homework. However, her explanation was very brief and she did not discuss what impact homework had on academic success. The literature review cited Bang et al. (2011) who emphasized that many immigrant students are unable to complete homework for a number of reasons as mentioned above in Chapter 2 and subsequently, are penalized for the incompletion. The study conducted by Bang et al. (2011) was focused on adolescent students and unfortunately, my research did not shed light on the situation regarding homework incompletion on academic success in elementary schools. Further research will be beneficial to investigate this.

4.3 Theme 3: Difference between Kindergarten and Grade Three

Although, the participants did not think there was much difference in the challenges experienced by a kindergarten immigrant student compared to a grade three immigrant student, they did differentiate between how immigrant students experienced the same challenges based on age. The literature review showed that research does not identify whether the primary grades experience different challenges. Instead, research focused on the difference in challenges between elementary students and high school students. Further research is needed to investigate whether based on the grade level in primary, if students experience different challenges. The two major differences that Lisa and Katie noted between kindergarten and grade three are described below.

4.3.1 Confusion between Limited English and Developmental Delay

Lisa commented the biggest difference between the ages was that in kindergarten she did not know whether the immigrant student had limited English or a developmental delay compared to a grade three immigrant student where she felt it was easier to spot the difference. She said
“you don’t know, it’s hard to differentiate is this an ESL issue, is this a developmental issue. That would be the hardest thing.” Katie also observed an immigrant student last year in kindergarten “who didn’t speak a word to anybody, they thought he was select mute” but now in grade one has got the confidence to speak more. This correlates with the research that often educators confuse limited English with a learning disability (Chu, 2009). It was insightful to see how the literature review reflected the experiences of Lisa and Katie. Both identified the risk of mislabeling immigrant students with a learning disability.

4.3.2 Negative Emotions Experienced

Lisa noticed there were different emotional reactions based on age to the challenges immigrant students experienced. For example, she spoke about how the younger the immigrant student, the more likely they were to cry because of the challenges they experienced. Whereas, she believed in the junior grades and possibly grade three immigrant students were more likely to experience anxiety and stress. Lisa also talked about grade five immigrant students being more mature and self-conscious “so they’re able to maybe handle themselves a little bit better.” In correlation to this, Katie observed that it was easier for kindergarten immigrant students as they were young so they could more easily pick up on the English language. Katie added that immigrant students have different reactions to the challenges based on age and gender. She had taught mainly female immigrant students who were quiet and commented the quiet response from her immigrant students could possibly be due to gender. Additionally, Katie’s experience may have involved students who were quiet because that was their personality and they were shy. Therefore, there are a number of possible explanations for the quiet reaction and there is no guarantee it was a result of the challenges the students experienced.

The literature review did not focus on how emotional development impacts academic
success. Katie gave an example of an immigrant student who used to fool around because he was embarrassed that he found the tasks difficult to complete. As a result, the student could not do the tasks which subsequently affected his academic success. I was surprised the literature I examined did not address how immigrant students’ negative emotions affected their academic success.

4.4 Theme 4: Support, Resources and Initiatives Available

Lisa and Katie mentioned a number of resources and initiatives in place to support immigrant students which are discussed below. Both thought the resources were helpful and without the resources there would be slower progress among immigrant students’ academic achievement. The literature I examined did not look at the resources and initiatives in place to support immigrant students. This may have been because the literature focused on the challenges and barriers immigrant students experience. Additionally, I did not search literature specifically about the resources and initiatives available to support immigrant students.

4.4.1 English as a Second Language (ESL) Teacher

When asked what support or resources there were to minimize the occurrence of the challenges immigrant students experience, Lisa and Katie instantly responded the ESL teacher. The fact that both participants agreed the ESL teacher was a major support, highlights how significant they deem the ESL teacher. In Lisa’s own words, the ESL teacher is a “big resource . . . even though [immigrant students] might speak fluently, there’s still all those cultural things that the ESL teacher doesn’t just focus on language, it’s the whole package.” Both pointed out the ESL teacher not only supported immigrant students but also provided advice to teachers on meeting the needs of immigrant students. Lisa and Katie emphasized that the ESL teacher worked with immigrant students within the classroom and also withdrew students for one-on-
one. Katie explained the difference between in-class and out of class support provided by the ESL teacher. In the classroom, the ESL teacher helped and provided guidance to immigrant students on the tasks given by the teacher. The ESL teacher made sure the students understood the instructions and were able to complete the task. Outside the classroom, the ESL teacher ran one-on-one or small group Sounds Skills programs working on letters and letter sounds.

However, Katie mentioned that the ESL teacher is now withdrawing immigrant students less and less because the Peel Board’s focus is currently on ESL teachers in the classroom supporting immigrant students to encourage inclusion and integration in the classroom. Katie disagreed with this approach as explained later on in this chapter.

Lisa noted one of the benefits of having an ESL teacher was that usually the ESL teacher knew the immigrant students’ needs well because they had known the students since kindergarten. The school Lisa works at has had the same ESL teacher for many years. Lisa explained that she sometimes forgot that a student had been an immigrant in kindergarten, whereas the ESL teacher knew because she had worked with the students each year and thus understood their struggles better than the teacher. Additionally, Lisa found the students were comfortable with the ESL teacher because of the long-term relationship that had continued to develop. Katie did not discuss this during her interview. This may have been due to the fact that Lisa provided this information through a question that arose during her interview about any drawbacks of having an ESL teacher. Unfortunately, I did not think to ask this question in Katie’s interview.

**4.4.2 Initiatives Implemented**

Lisa and Katie discussed a number of documents and programs that had been implemented successfully to support immigrant students, their parents and teachers. The ‘We
Welcome the World’ program was seen by Lisa and Katie to be useful. They informed me that immigrant students and parents had gone to the program and subsequently, Lisa found that it provided teachers with information about the students before they entered the school. Katie elaborated that ‘We Welcome the World’ was a successful initiative because it offered suggestions of how to work with the immigrant student and support them. As an immigrant myself, I had not heard of this program so I am wondering how many immigrant families know of this program and have used it. Further research is needed to answer these questions.

During the interviews, both participants discussed there were helpful guides from the Ontario government which teachers used. Lisa showed me some of the guides during her interview and explained, “it’s like Ontario’s guidelines from the Ontario government so supporting English Language Learners, the ESL guide . uhm Many Roots, Many Voices.” Katie elaborated that the English Language Learners guide showed teachers the stages immigrant students are at in learning English and thus instructed teachers to use the stages in assessment. She also said the guide provided strategies and suggestions to support immigrant students learning English. Lisa added that the Peel Board website had different resources where many subject areas had an ESL section and the website also included contact information for people in the board who could help. They both felt the guides and documents provided were useful and effective in supporting immigrant students. Lisa believed there had been progress over the years and emphasized, “before we used to get some things that were just for teachers, whereas now you know there’s different things that are available to the parents that we actually get some copies.” Lisa found that by having parent copies of the documents at school, they could hand them out to the parents and also keep up-to-date with what parents were being advised.

Unfortunately, due to time-constraints I did not have the opportunity to learn more about the
documents available. My next steps would be to investigate further the details of the guides in terms of what exactly they entail and how they are enacted in the classroom.

Other resources mentioned during the interviews were interpreters and translation of school letters. Lisa and Katie believed interpreters were valuable during parent-teacher interviews. Lisa reflected on her experience of using an interpreter with immigrant parents, “they were very new to the English language that they really needed that interpreter there because it would have been a waste of their time and mine otherwise.” She continued that without the interpreter, the parents would not have been able to understand her and vice-versa. She believed interpreters were beneficial because they allowed effective communication between teachers and immigrant parents which reflected on students who realized there was communication and feedback of the work they were doing in class and at home. Katie mentioned the significance of having interpreters as she had many experiences where older siblings would sit in on parent-teacher interviews. Katie found it to be counter-productive because she felt uncomfortable talking to older siblings about the student and also was not sure whether the feedback was being communicated to the parents. She realized that sometimes the older sibling did not understand what she was talking about and thus was unable to relay the message to the parents. Katie and Lisa briefly discussed how their school had translation strips in the office where they could attach the translation strip in the immigrant student’s language to a permission form or letter to notify the parents to get the letter translated. Lisa described that if parents were unable to get the letter translated, they could come to the school office and seek assistance in finding a translator. My only concern with this strategy is how much the translator costs, especially as many immigrant parents may be located in low-paid jobs (Stufft & Brogadir, 2011). Further research could be conducted to explore the challenges of gaining access to translators.
Finally, Lisa mentioned the Raising Prejudice program that she believed was effective. She explained every month a topic was taught and discussed in regards to immigration, multiculturalism, sexism, ageism and so on. She noted that the program was not just focused on issues immigrant students experienced but tackled prejudice. She thought that the program was relevant because when it focused on immigration, it provided teachers with books and lesson guides about bringing awareness. Lisa gave an example that she had used the program to read a suggested Robert Munch book about an immigrant from a war torn Iraq and how that affected the student’s transition to school in Canada. Lisa found the program to be effective among her students as it recognized difficulties immigrant students experienced and allowed room for discussion. It was interesting that Katie did not mention this program during her interview. There could be a number of possible reasons as to why, such as Katie did not know about the Raising Prejudice program, she did not find it useful or that she did not think it was relevant to mention.

It was surprising to learn that even though Lisa and Katie named a number of resources and initiatives, the supports available were not being used often. Lisa had used an interpreter once in her sixteen and half years of teaching and Katie had never used an interpreter. I do not know why the two participants did not use the interpreters more often and in hindsight, I should have asked during the interviews. I am unsure whether it is the parent or the teacher who can request the interpreter as this may have been a factor of the low use of interpreters, especially since parents may not know how to get an interpreter. Furthermore, Lisa felt a drawback of the resources was if teachers were unfamiliar because there was so much information available that teachers may not know how to find the specific information they were looking for. Overall, Lisa commented “I always felt like there was you know the information was out there, the help was out there” which correlated to Katie’s opinion about there being no drawbacks to the resources
available. Both participants found the resources beneficial but I feel more research is needed to investigate whether teachers are using the resources.

### 4.4.3 Parental Involvement

Lisa observed that immigrant parents were often supportive and seeked help and resources for their children. Katie agreed and described how she had some parents who provided their children with additional homework to ensure their children were having the time to practice and do well. Lisa noticed a difference between immigrant students who had parental involvement versus those who did not. She found those immigrant students who had parental support at home were practicing and using the available resources, subsequently showing continued improvement and excelling much faster than those students whose parents were unable to support them. She expressed, “if they just leave it up to time and if they just leave it up to coming to school it will be a little slower.” Lisa was referring to slower development. Lisa recognized that some parents “through their struggles and stuff maybe aren’t able to follow through” on supporting their children. Stufft and Brogadir (2011) coincided with Lisa’s view; they found that financial constraints position immigrant parents in jobs with long hours where they are unable to find the time to be actively involved in supporting their child. To my surprise, Katie did not mention the constraints preventing some immigrant parents from being involved with their child’s education.

Lisa commented that parent involvement can ‘eliminate’ the challenge the immigrant student encountered as she had observed two immigrant students experience the same challenge but because one family had worked together to ensure the student was supported at home, the challenge was ‘eliminated’ for that student. Lisa and Katie found immigrant students who had active parental involvement and support were more successful in school. This relates and supports the literature review where Garrett and Holcomb (2005) asserted “it has been well
established that family involvement in education increases student achievement” (p. 55) and Md-Yunus (2008) stated, “students’ home environments play a substantial role in academic performance” (p. 315). There was a strong consensus in the literature and my data that parental involvement influences academic success among immigrant students.

4.5 Theme 5: Suggested Recommendations to Support Immigrant Students

When asked what recommendations they would make, Lisa and Katie immediately suggested more time is needed with the ESL teacher. Both felt not enough time was given for the ESL teacher to support immigrant students. They explained one ESL teacher was present at their school and had to split her time between all the grades. Furthermore, the ESL teacher was not employed as a full-time ESL teacher but was also a French teacher in the school as well as having other roles. As a result, she would only spend an allotted amount of time teaching ESL. Katie explained, “I think our ESL teacher here is point three that translates to a day” per week of teaching ESL to students. Lisa and Katie emphasized that immigrant students who could not speak English were given higher priority with the ESL teacher, at the expense of immigrant students who could speak English but still had difficulty with understanding. The literature review I conducted did not position ESL time as limited or suggest more time with the ESL teacher was needed. However, the participants stressed this as the major recommendation to improve the support available in addressing challenges experienced by immigrant students.

Katie explained that each school had the power to decide which grades would get support time from the ESL teacher. At her school, kindergarten and grade one were not given ESL support. Katie discussed how she had been a grade one teacher for many years and had pushed for ESL support because she “saw the need” in grade one at her school. The school decision was based on the perception that grade one did not need the support because immigrant students at
that age could pick up on skills with the teacher whereas in the older grades support was needed. Katie disagreed with this view and managed to get ESL support in grade one. However, Katie felt that kindergarten did not need ESL support as students were all learning sound skills together at the same time. Katie found that because of the lack of time specified for ESL, some grades suffered such as grade one. She felt that if more time was given to the ESL teacher, more immigrant students would benefit from the service. When suggesting more time was needed with the ESL teacher, Lisa did not discuss this school based decision of allocating ESL time to specific grades as a reason. Neither was this highlighted in the literature in Chapter 2. Learning from Katie that ESL teacher support was not given to all grades concerns me that some schools are not meeting all immigrant students’ needs. The decision-making is subjective of which grade is considered to have more ESL needs which ranks students in terms of priority and denies some students the support they may need.

Earlier in the chapter, it was highlighted that Katie discussed the Peel Board’s move away from withdrawing immigrant students for ESL support and more on the ESL teacher supporting students within the classroom. Katie, however, suggested this was the wrong move. She believed a balance was needed where students received both in-class and out of class ESL support. Katie explained that many immigrant students:

Need some time where they’re learning the foundation because we’re not doing that anymore in grade one and if they don’t have the sounds skills, well we need to go back and teach it to them and it’s not going to be done in a whole group lesson or not going to be done with a teacher coming into the classroom to support. So I think in those cases, the younger grades, I think it’s important to pull them out and teach them those skills.
Katie recommended that students needed to be withdrawn from the classroom in order to develop the basic skills they require. It was not addressed in the literature whether the Peel Board’s focus on in-class ESL support was beneficial or detrimental to immigrant students’ academic success. This may be because the initiative to move towards less withdrawal for ESL support was fairly new. Additionally, the researchers may not have deemed the shift significant in relation to the challenges and barriers immigrant students face. Lisa also did not discuss this shift in ESL support to more of an in-class focus, which raises the question of what effects does this change have on immigrant students’ academic success.

Lisa and Katie’s main suggestion of more ESL time was discussed in great detail, whereas their other suggestions were very brief. Lisa touched upon the need to ensure the availability of up-to-date resources. Katie recommended smaller class sizes were needed because of the many diverse needs of the students within the class. Lisa and Katie did not discuss these recommendations in depth though as their main focus was on the need for more ESL support.

The recommendations suggested by Lisa and Katie differed to those suggested in the literature. Many scholars in the literature review recommended the following: more funding (Chu, 2009; First 1988), the recruitment of bilingual teachers and foreign-born teachers (First, 1988), teacher exchanges from different countries (Smith-Davis, 2004), staff development programs on ELL instruction (Stufft & Brogadir, 2011), workshops to get parents involved (Stufft & Brogadir, 2011), bilingual materials in the classroom (Peterson & Ladky, 2007), statement regarding immigrant students in policy handbooks (Garrett & Holcomb, 2005), after-school homework programs (Bang et al., 2011) and lastly, student achievement data reported specifically on immigrant students (Clarkson, 2008). I was surprised that the responses in the interviews were so different to the literature. The literature and interviews I conducted show
there are many possible recommendations to improve current practice and support immigrant students. Therefore, more can be done to help immigrant students who encounter challenges to academic success.

4.5.1 Advice to Teachers

I asked both participants what advice they would give to teachers, especially beginning teachers, in regards to working with immigrant students. I found this question to be important and insightful. After all, the aim of this research study was to learn about this topic in more depth so as a teacher I meet the needs of immigrant students and have the knowledge to minimize the occurrence of the challenges immigrant students encounter. Lisa advised two main things: knowing the ESL teacher as well as working with him or her and knowing the students in the class so that the teacher can identify their needs and intervene when the student is struggling. Katie’s advice involved the following: buddying immigrant students up with strong peers who will support them, one-on-one time with the teacher, dual-language books in the classroom, teachers taking their time and talking slowly, providing many oral opportunities for immigrant students to show their learning, encouraging immigrant students to participate in discussions by asking them questions they are able to answer and constant communication with immigrant students.

All of the advice given by the two participants resonated with me because I could see how these strategies would contribute to supporting immigrant students. It was interesting to note that Lisa and Katie gave practical advice. In comparison, the literature review focused on more administrative suggestions as mentioned above in terms of funding and reporting of achievement data. One thing that stood out to me was that Katie recommended having dual-language books in the classroom which coincided with Peterson and Ladky (2007) who emphasized the need to
integrate “bilingual and multicultural materials in regular classroom instruction” (p. 885). The researchers suggested this would help to combat the challenges encountered by immigrant students.

4.6 Conclusion

To conclude, the interviews provided insightful data that contributed to answering the key research question and sub-questions. Both teachers observed the English language to be the main challenge immigrant students encountered and highlighted the significant two-fold learning that occurred in terms of mastering English fluency and understanding. These findings aligned closely with the literature cited in Chapter 2. Lisa and Katie noted a difference in the language challenge based on which country immigrant students had emigrated from, those students who came from countries where English was not the spoken language had added struggles.

Three other challenges that came up in the interviews were immigrant students having to transition from rote learning to more inquiry-based, problem-solving learning, being unable to make friends because of the language challenge, and the pressure of high parent expectations. Interestingly, none of these were mentioned as challenges in the literature review but instead other challenges were addressed that Lisa and Katie did not discuss.

The main differences found between kindergarten and grade three immigrant students was that in kindergarten there was more confusion between whether the student had limited English or a developmental delay as well as the different negative emotions experienced by the two age groups. The literature did not focus on differences between these two age groups.

Lisa and Katie emphasized the ESL teacher, parental involvement and various initiatives and guides had been successful in supporting immigrant students. However, they found that many educators did not use the resources available due to unfamiliarity.
Lastly, both participants provided a range of recommendations and advice on the topic. The main recommendation was more time was needed with the ESL teacher as all immigrant students would benefit. A balance between in-class and out of class ESL support, availability of up-to-date resources and smaller class sizes were other suggested recommendations.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the implications of this study in terms of the broader education community and my own professional practice, provide recommendations and areas for further study, and close with concluding comments about the research study.
Chapter 5: IMPLICATIONS

5.0 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges and barriers immigrant students encounter to academic success in the primary grades, according to teachers. The findings support existing literature and identify common challenges encountered by immigrant students. This chapter provides an overview of the key findings and their significance to existing literature, highlights the implications for the broader education community and myself as an educator and researcher, suggests possible recommendations and areas for future research, and closes with concluding comments.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Significance

After an in-depth analysis of interviews with two teachers, five significant themes emerged: 1) Language as the Main Challenge, 2) Other Challenges Immigrant Students Encounter, 3) Differences between Kindergarten and Grade Three, 4) Support, Resources and Initiatives Available, and 5) Suggested Recommendations to Support Immigrant Students.

The first theme positioned English language as the main challenge experienced by immigrant students. This reflected the literature as many scholars documented language as the major challenge to academic success (Bang et al., 2011; Cheng et al., 2014; Chu, 2009; Delores, 1997; First, 1988; Garrett & Holcomb, 2005; Gunderson et al., 2012; Parker et al., 2005; Smith-Davis, 2004; Tienda & Haskins, 2011; Vang, 2006). Both participants revealed the complexity of learning English as it involved mastering fluency and comprehension. These findings were consistent with existing literature, which identified the two-fold learning that occurs of being both conversationally and academically proficient (Gunderson et al., 2012; Smith-Davis, 2004). Furthermore, both participants emphasized that the majority of immigrant students in their
classes were from countries in Asia. This explained why language was considered the major challenge as many immigrant students came from non-English speaking countries.

The second theme outlined other challenges the interviewees observed immigrant students encountering and three challenges became evident. Firstly, both participants highlighted the shift in Canadian schools to inquiry-based, problem-solving learning, where students are encouraged to explore and research, which makes it harder for immigrant students to adjust. In their countries of origin, many immigrant students engage in rote learning of copying and memorizing facts. Secondly, both interviewees agreed having friends impacted immigrant students’ academic success in relation to self-esteem and self-worth. However, perspectives differed regarding the process of making friends. One believed this was not a challenge because of the welcoming school culture among students; the other expressed immigrant students have difficulty making friends because of the language challenge. Thirdly, the pressure of high parent expectations was deemed a challenge for immigrant students and coincided with the work of Garrett and Holcomb (2005). Although, the third challenge was briefly mentioned by Garrett and Holcomb (2005), it is important to note the first two challenges were not addressed in the literature. Also, the participants did not discuss challenges identified by existing literature; these included bilingual education, discrimination, acculturation, funding and the effects of homework incompletion.

The third theme focused on the differences between kindergarten and grade three immigrant students. It was reported that the two age groups do not experience different challenges but there is a difference between how they experience the same challenges. Both interviewees noticed different emotional reactions to the challenges, younger immigrant students were more likely to cry whereas in grade three and above, students become more self-conscious
and thus contain their emotions. Furthermore, there is confusion between whether immigrant students have limited English or a development delay in kindergarten; whereas, in grade three it is easier to identify the difference. This aligned with Chu (2009) that educators often confuse limited English with a learning disability. The literature did not discuss the differences experienced by the two age groups but instead focused on differences between elementary and high school students.

The fourth theme centered on what support, resources and initiatives are available. A major support discussed in detail by the participants is the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. The ESL teacher works with immigrant students and provides advice to teachers on meeting immigrant students’ needs. Other initiatives considered to be useful, effective and successful in supporting immigrant students are: the ‘We Welcome the World’ program, guides by the Ontario government such as English Language Learners, resources on the Peel Board website, interpreters, translation of school letters and the Raising Prejudice program. However, both interviewees believed the supports were not being used often due to unfamiliarity. The literature examined did not focus on resources to support immigrant students. Another support that was observed to be significant in immigrant students’ academic success was parental involvement. Garrett and Holcomb (2005), Md-Yunus (2008) and both participants found parental involvement resulted in increased student achievement. Conversely, the participants and Stufft and Brogadir (2011) agreed many immigrant parents are unable to support their children due to working long hours.

The fifth theme looked at recommendations made by the participants to support immigrant students. The main recommendation was the need for more time with the ESL teacher. As there is only one ESL teacher in the school who does not teach ESL full-time,
immigrant students suffer. Both participants emphasized that the lower grades are given the least amount of ESL time because it is assumed they can catch up easier and suggested more ESL time would allow more immigrant students to benefit from the service. Other recommendations included a balance between in-class and out of class ESL support, availability of up-to-date resources and smaller class sizes. In comparison, the literature had more administrative recommendations: more funding (Chu, 2009; First 1988), the recruitment of bilingual teachers and foreign-born teachers (First, 1988), teacher exchanges from different countries (Smith-Davis, 2004), staff development programs on ELL instruction (Stufft & Brogadir, 2011), workshops to get parents involved (Stufft & Brogadir, 2011), statement regarding immigrant students in policy handbooks (Garrett & Holcomb, 2005), after-school homework programs (Bang et al., 2011) and student achievement data reported specifically on immigrant students (Clarkson, 2008). All recommendations contribute to improving the support available for immigrant students.

5.2 Implications

This study has implications for the education community and my own professional practice. The findings demonstrate a need for improvement to help immigrant students combat the challenges they encounter to academic success. Both policymakers and teaching staff can contribute to bringing about positive change.

5.2.1 Broad: The Educational Research Community

The main implication for the broad education community is this study highlighted challenges encountered by immigrant students that were not identified in previous literature. The findings are useful because they encourage teachers, administrators and school boards to
consider the challenges immigrant students encounter and how these challenges impact academic success. Furthermore, this study can be used as a learning tool for the education community in realizing that although there are resources and initiatives available, many teachers are unfamiliar and thus do not utilize the supports. It is the responsibility of teachers and administrators to ensure that resources are used effectively to have a meaningful impact on immigrant students’ academic success. This study could be used to bring about awareness and inform teaching practices.

5.2.2 Narrow: My Professional Identity and Practice

This study has two implications for me as a teacher and researcher. Firstly, as a teacher, the findings have contributed to my learning regarding the challenges and barriers immigrant students experience. Working in the Peel District School Board, I have and continue to work with a number of immigrant students. This study has equipped me with the knowledge to better serve this diverse group’s needs. Prior to the study, I relied on my siblings and my own experiences of challenges we faced as immigrant students. Through this research, I have come to learn the complexity of the challenges immigrant students encounter and why many immigrant students are prevented from succeeding academically. This study will inform my teaching practices as I will be conscious of the challenges and utilize the resources available to meet immigrant students’ needs. In particular, I will make it my priority to not assume students understand the material because they are fluent in English. The two-fold learning of being conversationally fluent and academically comprehending has had a significant effect on me as a teacher and will influence the way I work with immigrant students.

Secondly, the implication of the study as a researcher is I have learned what gaps are in current literature. As someone who is passionate about equity and anti-discrimination, I will
continue to investigate further areas concerning immigrant students. For example, the effects of the fairly new transition to inquiry-based, problem-solving approach to learning is a key topic I wish to learn more about to inform my teaching practices. Overall, the study is significant to me because it extends my knowledge about a topic that is important and contributes to my journey in creating an inclusive and equitable classroom.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on this study and previous literature, there appears to be two primary concerns at the present time and I would make the following recommendations for teachers, administrators and school boards:

1. As identified in this study, there is a lack of funding to provide schools with more ESL teachers and allotted ESL time, significantly impacting immigrant students. Due to time constraints many immigrant students are denied the opportunity to work with the ESL teacher and gain support to further their learning. As a result, these students’ academic success is negatively affected. Participants raised concerns that those students, especially in grade one, who are unable to access ESL support fair worse than those who gain the support. This is consistent with previous research which concludes there is a lack of funding for immigrant students (Chu, 2009; First 1988). Hence, in order to meet immigrant students’ needs, it is recommended administrators and school boards allocate more funding in this area. More funding would allow administrators to hire more ESL teachers and subsequently, result in immigrant students receiving a sufficient amount of ESL support.

2. Teachers should be provided time during the regular workday to attend training and professional development that is focused on learning about the various resources
available to support immigrant students. Excellent resources exist and will be better used when all teachers have informed access to them. Initial training should be followed up with in-class support to increase the likelihood that such resources are being well used.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

Three main questions were raised through my findings which require further research. It is recommended educational research scholars direct their attention to the fairly new inquiry-based, problem-solving initiative within schools. Although, through this research we learned that the new shift in learning is a challenge to immigrant students, this study was narrow in scope with two participants from the same school. Furthermore, the literature examined did not discuss this shift to inquiry-based, problem-solving learning as a challenge encountered by immigrant students. Therefore, additional research studies are recommended to address the following question: is the inquiry-based, problem-solving approach to learning a wide-spread challenge experienced by immigrant students and if so, why? A larger research study would be beneficial to investigate how the transition to inquiry-based, problem-solving learning is impacting immigrant students in comparison to how immigrant students adjusted to the Canadian school system prior to this shift in learning.

A second question that arose through this research was what impact does homework incompletion have on immigrant students’ academic success in the primary grades? Although this study discussed parent expectations and the financial constraints which impact parental involvement, it did not look at the effects of homework incompletion. Additionally, the literature focused on the reasons for homework incompletion and the subsequent effects for adolescent immigrant students on academic penalization. Further studies are required to address this
question because it is often neglected how homework incompletion influences academic success in the primary grades.

The findings in this study and previous literature have focused on how immigrant students experience the same challenges differently based on age and how there is a difference in the challenges encountered by elementary immigrant students compared to high school. However, the question remains: based on the grade level in primary, do immigrant students experience different challenges? Further research around this question will benefit teachers teaching the primary grades and immigrant students. It will also support this research study.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The findings in this study demonstrate that immigrant students continue to encounter challenges and barriers to academic success. In particular, English language has been documented as the main challenge experienced by immigrant students and this study reinforced this conclusion. The present study coincides with previous literature and also offers new insights about other challenges that were not mentioned previously. The findings serve to equip readers with some knowledge into the resources and initiatives available and encourage readers working with immigrant students to seek out these supports to promote academic success. This study matters to teachers, administrators and school policymakers who work with immigrant students and influence the decisions that impact this group of students. Additionally, this study is useful to immigrant parents in becoming aware of the challenges and barriers their children face and what kinds of supports are available. As shown through this research, collaboration between teachers and parents is important in promoting academic success among immigrant students and thus this study can provide an avenue for discussion and collaboration.
References


Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date:

Dear ____________________________,

My name is Jeevan Heir and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on investigating the challenges and barriers immigrant students encounter in primary classes from the perspective of teachers. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have five or more years of teaching experience, work in a school in Brampton and have experience working with the primary grades. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. This data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only people who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Ken McNeilly. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to participation, and I will share with you a copy of the transcript to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Jeevan Heir
Phone: 647-708-6693
Email: jeevan.heir@mail.utoronto.ca

Course Instructor’s Name: Ken McNeilly
Contact Info: kenneth.mcneilly@utoronto.ca

Consent Form
I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.
I have read the letter provided to me by Jeevan Heir and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ________________________________________

Name: (printed) ___________________________________________

Date: __________________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Section A: Background
1. How many years have you been a teacher?
2. How many years have you been teaching at this school?
3. How many schools have you taught at?
4. What grades have you taught?
5. How many students are in your class?
6. How many immigrant students are in your class?

Section B: Observations
7. What is the main challenge or barrier you have observed primary grade immigrant students encounter in the school?
8. Why is this the main challenge or barrier immigrant students encounter?
9. What support or resources is there to minimize the occurrence of this challenge or barrier?
10. What other challenges or barriers have you observed immigrant students encounter?
11. Why are immigrant students encountering these challenges and barriers?
12. Is there any difference in the challenges and barriers a Kindergarten immigrant student may experience compared to a Grade 3 immigrant student? Please explain.
13. How do immigrant students react to the challenges and barriers you have mentioned?
14. What are parents’ responses to the challenges and barriers their children encounter?

Section C: Views
15. What do you feel could be done to support immigrant students within the classroom today?
16. What initiatives do you believe have been successful in overcoming the challenges and barriers immigrant students encounter in the primary grades?
17. What suggestions would you make to improve current teaching practices in regards to how immigrant students are academically supported?
18. What resources are out there for teachers who are working with immigrant students?
19. What do you think of these resources in terms of benefits and drawbacks?

Section D: Advice
20. What advice would you give to a beginning teacher in terms of working with immigrant students?