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From the Selected Works of Paul N. McDaniel

June 23, 2022

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Research Study

***"Why do they have to laugh at me?":
Stereotypes and Prejudices Experienced by Immigrant Youth***

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ABSTRACT. When immigrating to a new host country, the overall integration process for immigrant youth and refugees can be taxing, as experiences with prejudice and discrimination are likely to occur. This article highlights the role of contact and social identity in reducing biases such as stereotypes or prejudice for immigrant youth using the contact hypothesis. Then, we apply the contact hypothesis to twenty-five essays written by immigrant youth in Atlanta, Georgia, and analyse the essays in order to understand their attitudes and emotions before, during, and after the migration process. Further, the article addresses immigrant youth expectations and challenges during the integration process and how they were able to adjust. With the findings from the data presented, we seek to answer how immigrant youth encounter and adapt to new environments. Moreover, we examined their societal expectations and their feelings about society's attitude towards them, as well as if these change the longer they reside in the United States increases. Recommendations for further investigation are discussed along with strategies to promote positive experiences for immigrant youth and their host country.

RÉSUMÉ. Lors de l'immigration dans un nouveau pays d'accueil, le processus global d'intégration des jeunes immigrants et des réfugiés peut être éprouvant, car des expériences de préjugés et de discrimination sont susceptibles de se produire. Cet article utilise l'hypothèse du contact pour mettre en évidence le rôle du contact et de l'identité sociale dans la réduction des préjugés tels que les stéréotypes ou les préjugés envers les jeunes immigrants. Nous appliquons ensuite l'hypothèse de contact à vingt-cinq essais rédigés par de jeunes immigrants à Atlanta, en Géorgie, et analysons les essais pour comprendre leurs attitudes et leurs émotions avant, pendant et après le processus de migration. L'article aborde également les attentes et les défis des jeunes immigrants au cours du processus d'intégration et la manière dont ils ont réussi à s'adapter. Avec les résultats des données présentées, nous cherchons à répondre non seulement à la façon dont les jeunes immigrés composent avec de nouveaux environnements et s'y adaptent, mais aussi à leurs attentes et à leurs sentiments sur l'attitude de la société à leur égard à l'évolution de ceux-ci en fonction du temps passé aux États-Unis. Des recommandations pour une enquête plus approfondie ainsi que des stratégies pour promouvoir des expériences positives pour les jeunes immigrants et leur pays d'accueil sont examinées.



Keywords: *contact hypothesis, immigrant youth, prejudice, social identity, stereotypes.*

INTRODUCTION

"When I got to the Atlanta Airport, I felt lost. I had left everything behind. I would go to school with no friends. I did not know the language. I did not know the people. I did not know the culture."

– Edanur (Rozman-Clark, Rodriguez, & Smith-Sitton, 2018, p. 69)

"They laughed at my accent. I was confused and thought, 'Why do they have to laugh at me?' Just because we came from another country didn't mean they had to laugh at me."

– Hau Phuong (Rozman-Clark, Rodriguez, & Smith-Sitton, 2018, p. 5)

Immigration is a challenging experience that requires immigrants to simultaneously manage multiple tasks such as navigating unfamiliar cultural settings, mastering a foreign language, dealing with financial struggles, and facing complicated bureaucracies. Adjusting to a new cultural environment and different societal norms can be a challenging experience for young immigrants. New contexts and experiences can challenge existing identity constructs, and create new tensions. While the immigration process frequently comes with a lack of control over certain aspects, such as the specific resettlement location for refugees and the initial living situation, adult immigrants often have some form of agency given their age and thus legal decision-making capabilities. Children, on the other hand, rarely decide to immigrate to another country by themselves and thus may experience a lack of control over their situation.

This article examines twenty-five essays of young immigrants that resettled in Atlanta, Georgia. Their stories are very different: some came as refugees with siblings, some came with their families after winning the Green Card Lottery, some have DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival) status, and a few were reunited with their families in the United States. From fleeing war and political persecution to pursuing an improved economic situation, better educational opportunities, or family reunification, the reasons the youth immigrants give for leaving their home countries are as diverse as their stories of arrival in the United States. However, the common lack of personal agency and limited control over the decision to come to the United States is striking. Often, parents or other family members make the decision to resettle in the United States on behalf of the young immigrant. Because the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) often determines the resettlement location for refugees, this adds an additional layer of loss of control and agency, especially for refugee youth.

Nervous and apprehensive behaviour is expected when one enters an unfamiliar environment and adjusts to a new culture and a new language (Chuang & Moreno, 2011; Martinez-Taboada et al., 2012; Fedi et al., 2019). But those feelings are often temporary and fade over time. As these feelings dissipate, a sense of belonging can develop that facilitates the process of integration. The terms "integration" and "successful immigration" are not unanimously defined.



However, conventional wisdom suggests that those who actively pursue immigrating to a different country are motivated due to push or pull factors to integrate well.

All individuals have their own biases that influence behaviours and attitudes towards others (Allport, 1979). However, initial insecurity and anxiety about new experiences also contribute to feelings of uncertainty and can make individuals wary of their new environment's established residents. While immigrants might hold stereotypical beliefs about the people who live in the receiving community, they can often also expect prejudice and even discrimination from them. Adult immigrants have to balance these preconceived notions and potential prejudices against the potential benefits of immigration, but immigrant youth rarely make that conscious decision. How do immigrant youth, who often have little agency over the decision to immigrate to another country, behave when encountering new environments that they did not actively choose themselves nor can actively control? To what extent do they expect to be discriminated against? Are they aware of their own biases? Do their attitudes towards others and expectations of others change with increased time spent in the United States?

We seek to answer these questions in this article. To do so, we introduce the *contact hypothesis*, along with theories on prejudice and stereotypes, and summarise the relevant research that made use of these theories. Then, we introduce the data, a series of interviews conducted with immigrant youth in the United States. We discuss the methods and limitations of this study, and describe the qualitative analysis in detail. Research findings are followed by a robust discussion of how they contribute to the larger literature on immigrant youth and identity. We conclude with a section connecting to other potentially related areas of study and recommendations for further research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sociological and psychological research has long examined concepts of identity and its impact on individuals and collective groups' behaviour, including how identity is conceptualised, negotiated, and influenced. Tajfel and Turner's seminal work on social identity in the late 1970s (see for example 1979; also Turner et al., 1979) introduced an understanding of identity as a cognitive process that an individual has some influence over. They specifically established that identity is significantly shaped by group identity through a process of social categorization, social identification, and social comparisons.

Several experiments showed that collective identity can form when different groups share common characteristics or goals, and this can quickly produce significant in-group favouritism. Conceptualising one's own identity in terms of collective identities that distinguish between "us" and "them" is a cognitive process and enhances identification with one's own group identities. In-group identities tend to be evaluated positively, and research has shown that if given the choice, individuals emphasise the highest status group identity available to them considered beneficial in the specific context (Tajfel, 1979). However, evaluations made about out-groups



are more likely to be negative; this is particularly true for judgments about ethnic groups (Allport, 1979).

The contact hypothesis, proposed by Gordon Allport in his seminal work *The Nature of Prejudice* ([1954], 1979), holds that contact between different societal groups, also known as inter-group contact, reduces biases like prejudice, stereotypes, and discriminatory behaviour. Allport defines prejudice as “an aversive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have objectionable qualities ascribed to the group” (Allport, 1979, p. 7). While individuals within society all have biases that at times may result in prejudging a person or situation, it is important to point out that “prejudgements become prejudice only if they are not reversible when exposed to new knowledge” (Allport, 1979, p. 9). Thus, biases stem from misinformation and misjudgement, which can be corrected towards a more accurate perception through exposure and interaction with the out-group.

According to the contact hypothesis, positive effects on inter-group relations only materialise when contact occurs under favourable conditions, such as when the interacting individuals or groups are of equal status and they conceive of or work towards a common goal (Allport, 1979). Through a meta-analysis of 515 studies, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) confirm that contact between groups of equal status reduces stereotypes. There does exist a debate within the scholarship, however, concerning how to define or ensure equal status. Interestingly for example, Cohen and Lotan (1995) find that perceived equal status is more important than actual equal status.

The positive effect of inter-group contact is even stronger when contact is supported or sanctioned by institutions, such as governmental policies or specific campaigns, including laws, customs, and traditions (see for example Achkasov & Rozanova, 2013). Additionally, superficial contact is not sufficient to rescue biases. Instead, some level of personal interaction between members of both groups that allows both sides to see each other's humanity, including for example real-life struggles, is required for inter-group contact to reduce biases successfully. Several studies point out that proximity is not enough to reduce stereotypes, but that the contact has to be ‘meaningful’ (i.e., it has to go beyond brief contact without much relevant substance) (Valentine, 2008; McDaniel & Smith, 2017; McDaniel et al., 2017a, 2017b; McDaniel 2018; McDaniel et al., 2019a, 2019b; Rodriguez & McDaniel 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2020). This observation leads to the notion of working towards a common goal, which several pieces of research have confirmed, to unify people amid differences (Lyras, 2007; Peachey et al., 2015) and is employed by peace initiatives around the world.

One example of creating a meaningful connection between two groups is the work of The Peres Centre for Peace, which brings Israeli and Palestinian children together to “unite children and youth from different cultures, religions and backgrounds, and who take to the field in matching uniforms and follow the same rules in a healthy, safe, and fun environment” (The Peres Centre for Peace, 2018). The work of The Peres Centre also takes into account another important finding from Pettigrew and Tropp (2008), who added that both parties must perceive contact as positive



in order to reduce biases. Further, the positively evaluated behaviour must be perceived as voluntary and representative of the group as a whole. Suspicions of ulterior motives when the other acts friendly or kindly can undermine this process of meaningful connection.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) makes important contributions to the contact hypothesis and cautions against overly eager attempts to make groups ignore or even negate differences. Collective groups are crucial identity building blocks that require distinct characteristics. The goal of inter-group contact is not to help groups realise they are the same in all respects, but instead aims to emphasise the humanity of the out-groups. Therefore, enabling both groups to see more of themselves in the other.

But what happens if the perceived uniqueness of the group's identity is threatened because expected differences are relativised too much, contact can elicit negative reactions to protect the in-group's uniqueness and identity. According to this assumption, contact should focus on reducing negative biases while maintaining each group's positively evaluated characteristics. Pettigrew (1998) adds that repetition is crucial for successfully changing prejudices as small changes in attitude culminate over time. For example, repeated soccer games between Israeli and Palestinian children show promise to reduce biases because they are not a single event but rather regular games where children and parents meet and get to know each other. There have been many notable studies on immigrant experience and prejudice; particularly interesting to our case is the study of Asendorpf and Motti-Stefanidi (2017). Their longitudinal study on the acceptance of immigrant youth in the classroom reveals a correlation between acceptance and inter-group contact, as well as exposure and involvement with the host country culture. The study also finds that children generally more easily accept their immigrant peers if other immigrants are in the same class. This distinction becomes less important with increased contact and emphasises the benefits of repeated connection. Further, Dovidio, Gaertner, and Saguy (2007) address the topic of dual identities and find that identification with both the country of origin and the host country improves inter-group relations in their research. The duality of identities can be seen in the work of Hickey (2004) who found that Muslim immigrant students develop two separate identities to satisfy the different expectations and demands that they encounter. Hence they exhibit one identity at home to maintain intra-group relations and another at school to foster inter-group relations. Titzman and Silbereisen (2009) hold that in a multi-ethnic context, in- and out-groups are newly defined, and that ethnicity can provide a new in-group the individual was not aware of before. The same study found that the development of the new in-group identity increases in-group favouritism. It is for these reasons, that our conceptual framework is grounded in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) as we explore if, when, and how the contact hypothesis shows up among immigrant youth in this Atlanta-based case study.

METHODOLOGY

We examined twenty-five essays featuring young immigrants who tell their stories about coming to and settling in the United States. The essays are a part of the Green Card Voices project that



uses storytelling to make immigrant narratives accessible through a personal lens. All twenty-five essays analysed for this project are part of the Atlanta edition of the Green Card Youth Voices book series published in 2018. This edition was chosen given Atlanta's status as a major-emerging immigrant gateway metropolitan region and its active role in immigrant resettlement efforts (McDaniel et al., 2017b; McDaniel 2018; McDaniel et al., 2019a, 2019b; Rodriguez & McDaniel 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2020). Concerns about the federal government repealing DACA and the potential consequences new legislation would have on individuals resulted in a reduction of published essays in the collection from twenty-five to twenty-one. Regardless, in our analysis, we use all twenty-five essays initially collected for this project but exclude the last names of student authors.

The interviews were conducted by the executive director of Green Card Voices and are available on the Green Card Voices website. We did not conduct the interviews with the students but used the essays that come from the existing interviews already conducted by Green Card Voices. Of the twenty-five student authors, sixteen are female, and nine are male. Twenty-four student authors were enrolled in one of three high schools in the Atlanta area at the time of the project; one author graduated and now teaches at one of the schools. We used the qualitative research software NVIVO to code and analyse the data. Information on demographic data includes twelve identifiers, for example, immigration status, gender, country of origin, time in the United States, if they came to the United States alone, and if they already had family in the United States.

Codes related to the contact hypothesis were divided into prior to/shortly after arrival in the United States and at a later stage. What were their first impressions when arriving in the United States? Were they excited, nervous, or insecure? What did they perceive as the biggest challenge(s) in their first few months after arrival in the United States? Did they expect or experience any prejudiced or discriminatory behaviour against them? Did they display any prejudices towards others? Who were their first friends and who are their friends now? Did they show a preference for their in-group, and if yes, for which in-group? Looking back, what or who helped most to overcome the main obstacles faced? Do they consider their current life in the United States to be positive or negative? Because of the small sample size and significant variations in age, immigration status, and time spent in the United States when participating in this project, findings cannot be used as a generalised representation of all youth immigrants. Even so, the data and our analysis provide an important contribution to the literature in that they offer unique insights from the immigrants' perspective. Furthermore, this project serves as a starting point to identify future research to be conducted with larger sample sizes.

FINDINGS

Fourteen students describe their initial response when they learned that they would move to the United States as anxious, including feelings of insecurity, nervousness, and fear. Five of the fourteen respondents advocated for staying in their home country. While many youth immigrants shared general excitement for the new, they also expressed sadness to leave friends



and family behind. Hau Phuong describes his emotional state before he left his home country of Vietnam in the following way:

I sat there and my tears just came out. I was asked if I was okay and said yes, but I didn't know. I felt like I was about to leave my stuff over here; my coach; my friends; all the good things. (Rozman-Clark, Rodriguez, & Smith-Sitton, 2018, p. 6)

Fear and uncertainty were noted as especially evident on arrival and on the first day of school. Marie, a refugee from Rwanda explains "First time I got here, I see everything is new, new for me. I was very scared" (p. 70). Edanur from Turkey explains her fears in more detail:

When I got to the Atlanta airport, I felt lost. I had left everything behind. I would need to go to school with no friends. I did not know the language. I did not know the people. I did not know the culture. Imagine if you were at a place you have never seen before and you were alone; if you were a stranger and if everything is strange. This is how I felt. (p. 70)

Youth immigrants spend a significant amount of time at school and often, the interactions at school with teachers and other students are some of the first interactions they have in the host country. Schools, and particularly teachers, play a significant part in the shaping of the identity of youth immigrants as they communicate host country values and expectations (Allen, 2006; see also Steinbach, 2012). It is not surprising that many young immigrants felt nervous or anxious about their first day at school, given the prominent role experiences at a school play in the immigration experience. All participants, regardless of gender and immigration statuses, reported apprehension and anxiety. Surprisingly, youth immigrants that immigrated with family members experienced just as much perturbation as those that travelled alone.

Only two respondents describe their feelings as exclusively positive and excited upon arrival. Farhat and May, from Afghanistan and Myanmar respectively, both expressed that they were very happy when they arrived in the United States. Three respondents describe mixed emotions: happiness and excitement for the new chapter in their life and sadness to leave their home and friends behind. Dania from Bangladesh expands on this dilemma:

I was happy, I was cheerful, I was like 'Yay! We're finally leaving. It has been our big dream to move to America and it's really happening'. I wasn't sad at that time. When I arrived at the airport, I started crying because it was like "I'm seriously leaving and I can't go back now'. It was really upsetting. I was seriously crying the whole way. (p. 54)

When asked to recount their first impressions of the United States, respondents share mostly basic and easily observable differences. Almost a third, 32%, were impressed by the height of buildings, as Yamileth stated: "I saw Atlanta I was mesmerised by the tall buildings and skyscrapers" (Personal Communication, 2018). Sakib and three others mentioned the size of roads and the number of cars being a part of their lasting first impressions in their memories. Sakib, for example, expressed that "the roads here are good, big roads, clean roads, with



space!" (Rozman-Clark, Rodriguez, & Smith-Sitton, 2018, p. 34). Seven students instantly noticed the variety in ethnic and racial backgrounds on arrival. While some described they felt overwhelmed and were not sure how to respond or what to think at first, five reported that they found the diversity intriguing and even exciting, as is evident in Dania's statement: "It was a whole different experience because they weren't like me. They had their own style of hair, clothes, and everything. I was like 'Wow, this is something brand new.' I felt like I discovered a whole new world" (p. 54).

One's immigration experience can also reinforce prejudices and stereotypes. These can manifest in how immigrants perceive others and how they believe they are being perceived. And because perception influences reality, such experiences may be hard to challenge. Among our youth, nine student authors reported *actual* experiences of discrimination against them, with five of them attributing the discrimination to their ethnicity. Yamileth, a student from Mexico, describes her experience as follows:

People would always tease me about my skin colour or about why I didn't speak English as well as they did. It made me feel inferior and ashamed of who I was for a very long time. So I had a very hard time adjusting to the bullying and the new country. (Personal Communication, 2018)

When asked what they considered the biggest obstacles they had to overcome after arriving in the United States, thirteen of the twenty-five participants cited language issues. Daniel recounts his experience: "My first days here I knew no English" (Rozman-Clark, Rodriguez, & Smith-Sitton, 2018, p. 43). Similarly, Farhat from Afghanistan remembers: "I could not speak in English. So when I came to school, I was very scared. I was nervous. I didn't understand English, so I went home and cried" (p. 70).

Language barriers and discrimination were consistently intertwined. Three students reported that they were discriminated against based upon their lack of English skills. Six students also reported they expected to be targeted or perceived to be made fun of due to their poor English skills; that fear, however, was not actualized. This is evident in Yehimi's testimony, who is also from Mexico: "I couldn't stand people talking around me because I thought that they were talking about me. Which is so silly, but at the time, [...] I just felt targeted when people spoke English around me" (p. 107). While gender did not play a role in being the target of discrimination in our dataset, the number of female immigrants that perceived or expected to be exposed to stereotypes or prejudice was twice that of males. Further, immigration status does not seem to be relevant: immigrants of all legal status categories experienced actual or perceived language-based discrimination.

For example, students anticipated that they would experience language-based discrimination. This was confirmed in their retelling of perceived and actual discriminatory experiences especially when language barriers intersected with processes of racialization. Language, like race, is fluid, dynamically changing over time, and socially constructed, ever shifting and evolving (Deo, 2021). Indeed, scholars have called for a focus on the interplay among language,



race, and racism, termed raciolinguistics or LangCrit (Crump, 2014; Alim, 2016; Rosa & Flores, 2017; Rosa, 2019; Deo, 2021). Crump (2014) suggests LangCrit to be used as a critical framework—constructed from aspects of identity, race, and language—for understanding intersections of both audible and visible identity in shaping experiences. For example, Crump notes, LangCrit is “a lens that allows for an examination of how individual social practices and identity performances are connected to a larger ecosocial system of discourses, policies, and practices” (p. 219). Moreover, Rosa and Flores (2017) suggest that a raciolinguistic perspective is vital to understanding and examining the historical and contemporary interplay of race and language. The youth in our study provide further evidence that racial and linguistic group identification and prejudice are closely intertwined.

Six participants showed clear in-group favouritism in the first few weeks after their arrival in the United States. Interestingly, all six participants are female, and four of them attributed their in-group preference to initial language barriers. They were looking for someone that could speak their language, as Karelin from Guatemala explains, “because she would translate for me, but she was also my friend, and it was a bridge to ease that language barrier” (Rozman-Clark, Rodriguez, & Smith-Sitton, 2018, p. 95). In contrast, five respondents stated that it was desirable or at least easier to some extent to have friends from the same country. Consider Dania’s description, “Then, I met some friends. Some of them were from my country, so it was easy to get along with them” (p. 54). None of the students who initially displayed in-group favouritism made statements regarding in-group favouritism after they had spent some time in the United States. However, three other students who initially did not display in-group favouritism in their statements wrote that they do prefer contact with individuals who were from their country of origin or who spoke their native language.

These young immigrants drew on a number of resources in order to overcome their obstacles after arrival. Firstly, ten students stated that making new friends made the transition easier and helped them start to feel at home in their new environment. “I eventually made some friends like I had in Myanmar. They are so good. I was so happy,” Dim recalls (p. 40). Further, eight students shared that their teachers helped them adjust and made a big impact on their life. As Yehimi wrote, “my teachers praised me and always encouraged me and told me that I would do great things and that I would go to college” (p. 108). And, for five of the students, the support of their family was very important; some families learned English together, as America said, “But my mom found a way to teach me English even though she does not know the language herself” (p. 80). Finally, extracurricular activities such as joining a football team (both American and international) or finding an organisation helped them adjust. For three students, official public and social support through their caseworkers made a significant difference to both them and their families

DISCUSSION

In the 25 essays, 15 student authors evaluated their life in the United States at the time of the essay. Out of these 15, 14 thought of their current situation positively. We also found that in-



group favouritism was significantly decreased. This was partially explained with students indicating they had friends from other cultures than their own and they were in fact, proud to have a diverse cadre of friends. For these immigrant youth, being in a multicultural environment resulted in a more optimistic view of their migration to Atlanta.

As discussed previously, according to the contact hypothesis, contact has to take place under favourable conditions for positive inter-group relationships to develop. First, inter-group contact should take place among individuals of equal status. In the case of youth immigrants, inter-group contact mainly took place in schools with individuals of equal status (i.e., other students). Second, as suggested by previous research, working towards a common goal is crucial. It is for this reason curricular and co-curricular group projects, team sports, as well as musical and creative arts performances are valuable to develop inter-group contact. We observe this in our research: A number of participants identified joining a sports team as a positive influence on their immigration experience. Third, this effect is strengthened when institutions, customs, and traditions support contact. The case of youth immigrants we study here meets this requirement as the school provides the official framework for interaction, and figures of authority, teachers and counsellors, “sanction” interactions and enforce rules. Fourth, the contact has to be meaningful and not merely superficial to remove biases successfully. Similar to conditions two and three, teachers play a crucial part as they can introduce common goals through group projects and can incorporate team-building activities into the classroom to increase interaction.

In accordance with Titzman and Silbereisen (2009), who hold that in- and out-groups are newly defined in multi-ethnic environments, the immigrant youths in our study redefined their in-groups in terms of national and linguistic collective identities. This is evident in this research, particularly for linguistic identities. While the need to connect to a fellow native speaker may also be attributed to the real and urgent need to receive information that is otherwise not accessible, the changing significance of in-group favouritism over the course of the immigrant youths’ adjustment to the new environment shows that identity constructs, including group identities, are constantly renegotiated and redefined.

Indeed, this observation also alludes to what Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) observed regarding negotiating identities in multilingual contexts. The role of language ideologies is intertwined with processes of identity formation and negotiation, informed by varying historical and social contexts. As Pavlenko and Blackledge (p. 2) observe, “the shifts and fluctuations in language ideologies and in the range of identities available to individuals have become particularly visible in the light of recent sociopolitical and socioeconomic trends: globalisation, consumerism, explosion of media technologies, ...” among other contemporary trends. Their research comes midway between earlier work and the more recent work on raciolinguistics and LangCrit (Crump, 2014; Alim, 2016; Rosa & Flores, 2017; Rosa, 2019; Deo, 2021). Our observations of immigrant youth experiences in Atlanta connect to both the older and more recent theories regarding the intersections among language, identity formation, race, and racialization. In a longitudinal study on immigrant acceptance, Asendorpf and Motti-Stefanidi (2017) found that the acceptance of immigrants in educational settings grows with increased inter-group contact, exposure, and involvement with the host country’s culture. The



overwhelmingly positive evaluation of their current situation and the overall reduction of in-group favouritism in this study supports this finding.

Feeling a sense of loss or grief when immigrating to a new country is a normal cognitive process along with excitement and curiosity over the start of a new life (Chuang & Moreno, 2011). The two students who exclusively voiced positive responses to immigrating to the United States both fled war and political violence. This finding highlights a critical distinction between refugees and those with other immigration statuses and demonstrates the underlying reason for why they came to the U.S. While individuals may choose to immigrate for a host of different reasons, those with official refugee status, by definition, were forced to leave their home country, often due to political violence and out of fear for their own safety. In addition to the involuntary nature of fleeing their home country, they were likely exposed to actual or potential traumatising events before leaving. While forced migration can result in a pronounced sense of loss of belonging and uncertainty about the self (Bemak et al., 2003), it can also lead to relief with feeling safe in their new environment, and, in time, to a greater sense of agency and self-confidence (Safak-Ayvazoglu & Kunuroglu, 2021). The latter is evident in two student writers, who express thankfulness for being safe and focus on building their new lives in the U.S. While not representative of all immigrant youth, this finding indicates that the reason for leaving one's home country plays a role in the emotional state and grievance process the immigrant goes through and could be considered in future research.

CONCLUSIONS

Our research supports the contact hypothesis in the case of youth immigration, showing that repeated collaboration and interaction with individuals of equal social status can lead to more positive attitudes toward outgroups. In addition to demonstrating the importance of support from new friends and family in this process, our findings also emphasise that institutions and individuals with a higher social status can play important parts for some youths; in our study, almost a third (32%) of all participants attribute a significant portion of their success to supportive teachers. This highlights the crucial role teachers play in making immigration experiences rewarding and confirms prior research indicating the influence educators have on the success of youth immigrants (Plaisance et al., 2015; McDaniel & Smith, 2017; McDaniel et al., 2017a; Rodriguez et al., 2019).

To make firm conclusions regarding immigrant youth, a large-scale research project to examine the validity of the contact hypothesis among immigrant youths needs to be conducted. To address this need, we intend to include all editions of the Green Card Youth Voices book series in future research to increase the sample size and detect potential differences among various geographic locations. Further, we suggest that future research includes equal sample sizes of the different status categories. While participants in this project represent several immigration statuses—from DACA to citizenship—the small sample size does not provide enough data to compare the impact of immigration status.



The student authors in this project see acquiring language skills as crucial for reaching their full potential and to becoming active and contributing members of society. While previous studies have examined host-country acquisition programmes critically, the student authors in this study highlight the benefits of becoming more fluent in English. In addition to the benefits for their education and professional life, they then often serve as translators for other family members and help them navigate complex bureaucratic procedures and structures. Therefore, investment in resources that support host country language acquisition for immigrant youth positively affects not only the immigrant youth but also their family system and society in the long term. Importantly, though, host-country acquisition programmes should not precede other educational and social integration efforts, but should take place in parallel. Dovidio, Gaertner, and Saguy (2007) claim that identification with both the country of origin and the host country improves inter-group relations. Our research did not address immigrant youth's self-identification, which would be a topic worth addressing in future research.

Language acquisition also played a crucial role when examining how the contact hypothesis held up in the study. The initial anxiety the youth immigrants in our study expressed about interactions with others at school as well as expectations of being discriminated against mostly resolved as their English improved and as they could interact more effectively with the host country community and particularly their peers at school.

As we stated at the outset, immigration is challenging and requires much multitasking among differing cultural settings, languages, finances, and bureaucracies. Adjusting to different norms and a new environment is particularly taxing for youth immigrants—individuals who often have the least agency over the many decisions made throughout the migration experience. As such, schools have the challenge and the opportunity to learn from the experiences of their immigrant students who represent many different backgrounds, countries of origin, cultural and linguistic contexts, and migration experiences, to effectively plan for future immigrant youths in their schools.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the *Green Card Youth Voices: Immigration Stories from an Atlanta High School* team of student authors and editors, school and university faculty, and the varied community partners who made this project possible. We especially appreciate the time and talents of Katherine Hardin, who guided us through the J-BILD revision process to ensure we documented our experiences in a manner that would better help others. Likewise, we would like to thank those on the editorial team, including Bethany Cross, our copy editor, for making the article you see before you a reality.