

# The Significance of Relationships: Academic Engagement and Achievement Among Newcomer Immigrant Youth

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**Background/Context:** *Newcomer immigrant students are entering schools in the United States in unprecedented numbers. As they enter new school contexts, they face a number of challenges in their adjustment. Previous literature suggested that relationships in school play a particularly crucial role in promoting socially competent behavior in the classroom and in fostering academic engagement and school performance.*

**Purpose:** *The aim of this study was to examine the role of school-based relationships in engagement and achievement in a population of newcomer immigrant students.*

**Research Design:** *The Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study (LISA) used a mixed-methods approach, combining longitudinal, interdisciplinary, qualitative, and quantitative approaches to document adaptation patterns of 407 recently arrived immigrant youth from Central America, China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico over the course of 5 years. Based on data from the last year of the study, we examine how the role of relationships mediates newcomers' challenges with academic engagement and performance. We identify factors that account for patterns of academic engagement and achievement, including country of origin, gender, maternal education, English language proficiency, and school-based relationships.*

*Findings:* Multiple regression analyses suggest that supportive school-based relationships strongly contribute to both the academic engagement and the school performance of the participants. Qualitative interview data and case studies serve to elucidate the relational processes inside and outside school that influence different academic outcomes.

Immigrant children are entering schools in the United States in unprecedented numbers, making them the fastest growing segment of the youth population (Landale & Oropesa, 1995). These children come from highly diverse backgrounds, with over 80% arriving from Latin America, Asia, and the Afro-Caribbean basin (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003). Although they bring remarkable strengths, including strong family ties, deep-seated beliefs in education, and optimism about the future, they also face a range of challenges associated with the migration to a new country, including high levels of poverty (Capps, Fix, Ost, Reardon-Anderson, & Passel, 2005), unwelcoming contexts of reception (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), experiences of racism and discrimination (Szalacha et al., 2004; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), and exposure to school and community violence (M. Collier, 1998; García-Coll & Magnuson, 1997; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). These stressors complicate immigrant students' adjustment to new schools and community settings and tax the coping capacities of even the most robust immigrant adolescents, leaving them vulnerable to academic failure.

Consequently, a large segment of immigrant youth struggle to succeed in the American educational system. A number of studies have demonstrated that although immigrant youth have more positive attitudes toward their schools (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995), hold higher aspirations (Fuligini, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), and are more optimistic about the future (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001) than their native-born peers, many perform poorly on a variety of academic indicators, including achievement tests, grades, dropout rates, and college enrollment (Gándara, 1994; Orfield, 2002; President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic American Education, 1996; Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2001). For nearly all immigrant groups today, length of residence in the United States is paradoxically associated with declining academic achievement and aspirations (Fuligini, 1997; Hernández & Charney, 1998; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995).

This disengagement from school is particularly troubling in light of the central importance of academic success in the adaptation of immigrants to postindustrial nations (Bloom, 2004). Whereas past waves of immigrants could leave the secondary school system without unduly paying a

price in the workplace, today's economic structure is such that high school dropouts are essentially sentenced to jobs in the bottom of our hourglass economy, with little promise for status mobility (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Further, although the more privileged middle-class White American student may be able to take a misstep in his or her education and recover in later years, students of color (who make up 80% of immigrant students) are far less likely to be able to recover (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Hence, it is of critical importance to understand the factors that precipitate immigrant students' disengagement from American schools and the factors that protect them from disengagement. The goal of this study is to examine newcomer first-generation immigrant adolescent students' academic experiences and adjustment, paying particular attention to the factors that might heighten or attenuate the risk for poor academic outcomes.

First-generation newcomer immigrant youth share a number of the same challenges as 1.5- and second-generation immigrant youth, but newcomers also face challenges particular to the social and cultural dislocations inherent in the process of migration (Sluzki 1979; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001) and the challenges of language acquisition. Additionally, immigrant parents who have limited English skills often find it difficult to monitor their children's academic progress, keep track of their children's after-school activities, and understand their children's experiences (Cooper, Denner, & Lopez, 1999; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Given the dramatic rise in this school-age population, it is important that we develop models that will shed light on their processes of academic adaptation.

### UNRAVELING THE IMMIGRANT PARADOX

As they enter American schools, newcomer immigrant children<sup>1</sup> tend to be both optimistic about their future and engaged in learning (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Over time, however, this engagement can become precarious and vulnerable to change. Indeed, despite their initial academic advantage, for nearly all immigrant groups, length of residence in the United States appears to be associated with declines in academic achievement and aspirations, and in physical and psychological health (Fuligini, 1998; Hernández & Charney, 1998; Portes, 1996; Steinberg et al., 1996; Vernez, Abrahams, & Quigley, 1996).

It is important to note, however, that not all first-generation newly immigrated students fall prey to such declines; some of these academically resilient children function better than expected given the level of

stress to which they have been exposed. A better understanding of such resilience or “positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar, 2006, p. 742) can help to inform developmental theory, and educational practices and policies that affect immigrant students. The limited research that has been done with immigrant students has shown that certain youth appear more likely to succeed than others: Proficiency in English, literacy in a native language, higher self-efficacy, and being female, for example, appear to be robust predictors of better academic outcomes in immigrant students. There is also emerging evidence that suggests that close and confiding relationships can play an important role in children’s adaptive responses to school and can lead to children becoming more academically engaged in school.

### CHALLENGES AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Many immigrant children, especially those who live in urban neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, face a daunting mix of odds in their schools and communities (Waters, 1999). Neighborhoods that combine such features as unemployment (Wilson, 1997), violence, structural barriers (Massey & Denton, 1993), and intense segregation by race and poverty (Orfield, 1998) tend to have schools that are overcrowded and understaffed, face high teacher and staff turnover, and are plagued by violence and hostile peer cultures (García-Coll & Magnuson, 1997; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996; Willis, 1977). Concerns about vulnerability to attacks have a detrimental effect on the school climate and can affect students’ readiness and ability to learn (Elliott, Hamburg, & Williams 1998). Exposure to and fear of violence also undermine students’ relationships with peers and teachers, weakening their capacities to experience trust (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992; O’Donnell, Schwab-Stone, & Muyeed, 2002). Because students of color and those attending urban schools are most likely to encounter violence, such concerns affect a disproportionate number of immigrant students.

Although many immigrant students are adversely affected by negative school climates, others who are similarly exposed achieve academic success. Factors that relate to background characteristics or family capital are also among the most stable predictors of resilience in children (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1997; O’Donnell et al., 2002). Immigrant children live in varied and complex household configurations. Some live in traditional two-parent families, but many others live in extended families, in blended families, or with nonparental caretakers (such as grandparents, godparents, aunts, and uncles). Two or more adult figures in the

home are more likely to be able to provide financial resources, supervision, guidance, and discipline (Aufseeser, Jekielek, & Brown, 2006; Portes & Rumbault, 2001). Multiple caretakers are better equipped to diffuse the many stresses of child care in a foreign country, to deploy resources that reduce social anxiety, and to facilitate academic engagement and achievement. There is also a direct relationship between parental education and performance on achievement tests, grades, and dropout rates (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Feliciano, 2006; Jencks, 1972; Madaus & Clarke, 1998). Parents with higher educational levels are better able to provide the types of resources that would place their children at an advantage over children whose parents have lower levels of education. These resources include providing more literacy opportunities, communicating with more sophisticated vocabularies, providing access to computers, actively scaffolding homework assignments, providing private SAT instruction, and accessing college pathway knowledge and other academic supports (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

A number of student-level variables are also implicated in variability in academic performance. English language proficiency, for example, affects students' abilities to detect social nuances in the school setting and is also highly predictive of academic success (Muñoz-Sandoval, Cummins, Alvarado, & Ruef, 1998). The ability to perform on multiple-choice tests, to extract meaning from written text, and to argue a point both verbally and in writing are essential skills for high levels of academic attainment. In Portes and Rumbaut's (2001) study of 5,000 first- and second-generation immigrant students from 13 countries, English language fluency emerged as a key factor in predicting positive academic adjustment. The majority of recently arrived immigrants face the challenge of mastering English while concurrently adjusting to a new school and gaining academic skills (Ruiz-de-Velasco et al., 2001). Whereas verbal proficiency can be developed within a couple of years, the level of language skills necessary to be competitive with native-born peers in the classroom can take 5–7 years to acquire (V. P. Collier, 1992; Cummins, 1981; Klesmer, 1994).

Several scholars have identified a gendered pattern that is consistent with the national trend: Immigrant girls tend to outperform boys in educational settings (Brandon, 1991; García-Coll, Szalacha, & Palacios, 2005; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rong & Brown, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004; Qin-Hilliard, 2003). A number of factors may contribute to this phenomenon. In a variety of settings (for example, for Afro-Caribbean youth in Britain, Canada, and the United States, for North African males in Belgium, for Koreans in Japan, and for Moroccans and Algerians in France), there is evidence that boys suffer higher levels of

physical aggression and racism than girls and are at greater risk for academic disengagement than their female counterparts (Crul & Vermeulen, 2003; DeVos, 1980; Ogbu, 1978). Furthermore, some research suggests that compared with their brothers, immigrant girls have many more responsibilities at home and feel a stronger sense of family obligation (Fuligini & Pederson, 2002), which may keep them away from the lures of the street (Olsen, 1997; Qin-Hilliard, 2001; Sarroub, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999; Waters, 1996). In addition, immigrant boys tend to have fewer meaningful relationships with their teachers and perceive their school environments to be less supportive than do their sisters (Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004; Way & Chen, 2000).

Academic self-efficacy—the belief that one is competent and in control of one’s learning—can serve to bolster academic engagement and performance. This variable is likely to predict the extent to which a child engages in learning the new language, forges new relationships, and connects with the academic tasks at hand (National Research Council, 2004; Schunk, 1991). In essence, higher academic self-efficacy appears to be instrumental in fostering student learning and relational and academic engagements, which in turn lead to higher academic performance.

#### MEDIATING INFLUENCES ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: RELATIONAL AND ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

Successful adaptations among immigrant students appear to be linked to the quality of relationships they forge in their school settings (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Indeed, social support in the school has been implicated in the academic adaptation of students, and immigrant students appear to be no exception (Cauce, Felmer, & Primavera, 1982; Dubow, 1991; Levitt, Guacci-Franco, & Levitt, 1994; Wetzel, 1999). Social relations provide a variety of protective functions—a sense of belonging, emotional support, tangible assistance and information, cognitive guidance, and positive feedback (Cobb, 1976; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990; Wills, 1985). The literature suggests that relationships in school play a particularly crucial role in promoting socially competent behavior in the classroom and in fostering academic engagement and achievement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Hill & Madhere, 1996; National Research Council, 2004; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2007).

Peers provide important emotional sustenance that supports the development of significant psychosocial competencies in youth (Selman, Levitt, & Schultz, 1997). Peers can moderate the effects of school-related violence and provide support and relief from anxiety (Gibson, Gándara,

& Koyma, 2004; Hill & Madhere, 1996). Moreover, by valuing certain academic outcomes and by modeling specific academic behaviors, peers establish the “norms” of academic engagement (Berndt, 1999; Ogbu & Herbert, 1998; Steinberg et al., 1996). Peers can tangibly support academic engagement by clarifying readings or lectures, helping one another complete homework assignments, and exchanging information about SATs, helpful tutors, volunteer positions, and other college pathway knowledge (Stanton-Salazar, 2004). But because immigrant youth often attend highly segregated, deep-poverty schools (Orfield, 1998), they may have limited access to networks of knowledgeable peers.

Connections with teachers, counselors, coaches, and other supportive adults in the school are particularly important to the academic and social adaptation of adolescents in general (Hamilton & Darling, 1996; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997; Pianta, 1999; Rhodes, 2002; Roeser & Eccles, 1998) and appear to be particularly important for immigrant adolescents (Roffman, Suárez-Orozco, & Rhodes, 2003). These youth undergo profound shifts in their sense of self and are struggling to negotiate changing circumstances in relationships with their parents and peers (Rhodes, 2002). Protective relationships with nonparent adults can provide immigrant youth with compensatory attachments, safe contexts for learning new cultural norms and practices, and information that is vital to success in schools (Roffman et al.). Consistent associations also have been found between students’ perceptions of relationships with peers and caring adults at school, and increases in social pursuits, motivation, academic competence and achievement, psychosocial functioning, school attendance, and academic engagement (see Davis, Davis, Smith, & Capa, 2003; Goodenow, 1992; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jenkins, 1997; Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998; Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994).

In turn, academic engagement—“the degree to which students are ‘connected’ to what is going on in their classes” (Steinberg et al., 1996, p. 15)—has been shown to contribute to academic performance (Fredricks et al., 2004; Greenwood, Horton, & Utley, 2002; Marks, 2000; National Research Council 2004; Steinberg et al.). In the research literature, the term *academic engagement* encompasses cognitive, behavioral, and emotional dimensions (Fredricks et al.). Here we focus on the cognitive and behavioral dimensions. Cognitive engagement is the degree to which students are interested in and curious about what they are learning, and behavioral engagement reflects students’ participation and

efforts in academic tasks (i.e., doing homework, turning in assignments on time, and paying attention to class work, classroom behaviors, and attendance). Academic engagement occurs along a continuum. Highly engaged students are actively involved in their education, completing the tasks required to perform well in school. Somewhat engaged students may be doing “good enough” academic work but are not reaching their academic potential. Further along the continuum, there may be a significant gap between students’ intellectual potential and their academic achievement. In cases of more extreme academic disengagement, lack of interest, erratic class attendance, and inadequate assignment completion can lead to multiple course failures that often foreshadow school dropout (Rumberger, 2004). Moreover, academic disengagement may not be immediate, but rather may occur over time in response to the accruing difficulties in community, school, and family circumstances, and the consequent adjustments and compromises that are made.

### STUDY OBJECTIVES

In this article, we examine the contribution of relationships to academic engagement and performance using data from the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study (LISA) of 407 recently arrived immigrant youth from Central America,<sup>2</sup> China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007). We identify factors that account for patterns of academic engagement and achievement of these youth in the final year of the study and use correlation analyses and stepwise-regression modeling to shed light on the factors that contribute to these patterns. Qualitative interview data and case studies elucidate school-based and family and community relational processes that influence academic outcomes for recently arrived immigrant youth.

### PARTICIPANTS

A total of 407 newcomer (arriving within 5 years) first-generation immigrant students, stratified by region of origin—Central America, China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico—were recruited from seven public school districts in Massachusetts and Northern California.<sup>3</sup> By the 5th and final year of the study, our sample size was 309, with a low attrition rate of just under 25% (on average, 5% annually). The 5th-year sample included 57 Central American, 72 Chinese, 60 Dominican, 50 Haitian, and 70 Mexican youth (Table 1).

**Table 1. Selected Characteristics of Participants**

Characteristics Yr 5	Overall		Central America		China		Dominican Republic		Haiti		Mexico	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Sex												
Male	134	43.4	22	38.6	28	38.9	23	38.3	23	46.0	38	54.3
Female	175	56.6	35	61.4	44	61.1	37	61.7	27	54.0	32	45.7
Household Composition												
Two-Parent	177	67.6	36	67.9	47	85.5	25	46.3	20	54.1	49	77.8
Single-Parent: Mother	68	26.0	15	26.3	7	9.7	25	41.7	9	18.0	12	17.0
Single-Parent: Father	13	5.0	2	3.5	1	1.4	3	5	5	10.0	2	2.9
Extended Family in home	68	26.0	26	49.1	4	7.3	12	22.2	13	35.1	13	20.6
Completed High School												
Mother	87	33.3	9	17.0	27	49.1	29	53.7	3	8.3	19	30.2
Father	64	24.5	13	24.5	22	40.0	11	20.4	7	19.4	11	17.5
Either Parent	115	43.9	16	30.2	34	61.8	33	61.1	10	27.0	22	34.9
Employment Status												
Mother works	192	73.6	46	86.8	40	72.7	39	72.2	23	63.9	44	69.8
Father works	168	64.4	35	66.0	46	83.6	23	42.6	22	61.1	42	66.7
Both parents work	177	67.6										
Household Income												
< \$20,000	66	26.0	12	23.1	10	18.5	18	33.3	8	24.2	18	29.5
\$20,001-\$49,000	115	45.3	26	50.0	25	46.3	19	35.2	18	54.6	27	44.3
> = \$50,000	73	28.7	14	26.9	19	35.2	17	31.5	7	21.2	16	26.2

## AGE DISTRIBUTION

The 309 participants in Year 5 were between the ages of 9 and 14 during the 1st year of the study, with a mean recruitment age of 11.7 ( $SD = 1.59$ ). The groups were nearly comparable in age (with the exception of the Haitians who were, on average, 1 year younger than the other participants). During the recruitment process, we attempted to stratify each group equally by gender, although we were somewhat more successful in recruiting girls than boys. By the 5th year of the study, 57% of the sample was female, and 42% was male.

## HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION

Over two thirds of the sample that supplied information about household composition lived in families with two parental figures; however, there was significant between-group difference,  $C^2_{(4,258)} = 25.25$ ,  $p < .001$ . Chinese participants were most likely to live in two-parent homes (85%), whereas Dominicans were the least likely to live with two parents (46%). Just over one quarter of the students in the sample lived in single-parent, mother-headed households compared with only 5% in single parent,

father-headed households. However, in father-headed homes, a significantly higher than expected percentage of households (77%) also consisted of adults who were extended family members,  $C^2_{(1,261)} = 18.4$ ,  $p < .001$ , compared with a lower, though not significant, expected percentage (26%) in mother-headed homes.

#### PARENTAL EDUCATION

Mean maternal education was 9.2 years, with a range from 0 to 21 years ( $N = 261$ ). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) established a significant difference in education between mothers from different countries of origin,  $F_{(4,238)} = 7.1$ ,  $p < .001$ . Mean paternal education was 8.8 years for the total sample, with a range from 0 to 26 years ( $N = 262$ ). A one-way ANOVA found a significant difference between fathers from different countries of origin,  $F_{(4,176)} = 8.2$ ,  $p < .001$ . This wide range of years of education is consistent with national norms, in which immigrants are over-represented at both high and low ends of the educational spectrum (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003). An interesting finding was that mothers in our sample were much more likely to have completed their high school education than were fathers (33% vs. 25%).

#### PARENTAL EMPLOYMENT

Three quarters of the mothers were employed outside the home, versus 64% of the fathers. Among the mothers, there were no significant differences in employment rates by country of origin. However, among the fathers, workforce participation differed significantly by country-of-origin group, with the highest percentage for Chinese fathers, with about 84% employed, and the lowest percentage for Dominican fathers, with just under 43% employed. There was a significant relationship between completing high school and employment,  $C^2_{(1,260)} = 22.6$ ,  $p < .001$ . Fathers who did not finish high school were less likely to be employed (56%) than if they had graduated (89%). Mothers who did not finish high school were also less likely to be employed (69%) than if they had completed high school (83%), although the relationship was less significant compared with fathers,  $C^2_{(1,260)} = 5.7$ ,  $p < .05$ .

#### INCOME DISTRIBUTION

Seventy-five percent or more of household incomes from all groups clustered in the \$10,000–\$50,000 range. One quarter of the entire sample subsist at the lowest income bracket (making under \$20,000 yearly).

However, although parents who completed high school were much more likely to be employed, the relationship between household income and high school completion was less extreme. The largest differences were in the lowest income bracket for fathers and the highest income bracket for mothers. Eleven percent of the households with high school-educated fathers made less than \$20,000, compared with 30.9% of households with fathers who did not complete high school; at the other end of the continuum, 38.4% of households with mothers who completed high school made \$50,000 or more per year, compared with 23.8% of households in which mothers hadn't completed high school.

## METHODS

### DESIGN AND PROCEDURES

#### *Recruitment*

Students were recruited from 51 schools in seven school districts with high densities of immigrant students. Participants were restricted to those who had immigrated within 5 years of the first interview; they were required to have spent at least two thirds of their lives in the country of origin. To maximize the likelihood of retaining informants, participants were limited to those who had one working parent and at least one relative residing in the area for a minimum of 1 year. The participants were restricted to youth between the ages of 9 and 14 (at the beginning of participation in this study).

#### *Mixed-method research strategy*

There is a growing consensus that mixed-method designs, linking emic and etic approaches (Cooper, Jackson, Azmitia, & Lopez, 1998), and triangulated data, which embed emerging findings into an ecological framework, are essential to the cross-cultural research endeavor (Branch, 1999; Bronfenbrenner, 1988; Doucette-Gates, Brooks-Gunn, & Chase-Lansdale, 1998; Hughes, Seidman, & Edwards, 1993; Sue & Sue, 1987). The LISA took an interdisciplinary and comparative approach. Ethnographic participant observation was essential in elucidating the informants' points of view and in identifying locally relevant themes. A dynamic inductive process involving field-emerging themes informed our development of culturally sensitive systematic strategies of assessment and the interpretation of findings (Knight & Hill, 1993).

### *Research team*

A project of this kind required a community of researchers. The project's principal investigators consisted of an interdisciplinary research team with a long history of collaboration focusing on the cultural and psychological features of immigration. Given the number of countries of origin from which our immigrant sample was drawn, a team of bilingual/bicultural research assistants (RAs) was crucial to the success of this project. By hiring bicultural and bilingual RAs, we were able to establish rapport and trust within the communities, and we gained entry into immigrant populations that might otherwise have been difficult to access. These researchers were also crucial in minimizing the attrition rate. Furthermore, they served as cultural advisors, providing feedback on the validity of interview questions for students of their country of origin, assisting in assuring the validity of translations, and serving to contextualize emerging findings.

RAs were largely responsible for recruitment and for conducting student, parent, and selected teacher interviews. They were also responsible for focused ethnographic observations across school contexts, note taking and administration, and translation of the completed interviews. RAs were required to maintain detailed research notes and develop theoretical memos that they submitted monthly. They participated in training lectures conducted by the project codirectors and by eminent educational anthropologists, sociologists, and cultural experts. Boston-area RAs met weekly with the codirectors in meetings that functioned as "ethnographic supervision"—a model we borrowed from clinical practice. The San Francisco RAs met weekly with the project coordinator and approximately monthly with one of the codirectors to discuss emerging issues. This steady stream of communication provided RAs with intense supervision and guidance and kept the principal investigators apprised of the denouements in the research.

Because this project involved diverse populations, we recruited cultural advisors to provide us with guidance on the groups under consideration with which the codirectors did not have specific research expertise (specifically the Asian and Caribbean immigrants). The cultural advisors acted as critical resources for the research teams. These advisors had a dual role: They worked with us in the training of RAs, and they helped us with the interpretation of emerging findings.

### *Student interviews*

Bilingual and bicultural RAs administered structured student interviews

of all participants, which were conducted each year of the 5 years of the study. The interviews were done face-to-face on a one-to-one basis, orally in the language of the student's preference. Some interviews were conducted entirely in students' home languages, others, especially by the end of the study, were largely in English, and many involved speaking in both languages.

### *Parental interviews*

The parental interviews were conducted during the first and last years of the study. In the first year, the information gathered centered primarily on issues related to the decision to migrate, parent and student educational histories, household composition, parental employment, and other demographic data. In the last year of the study, the parent interview was administered to gather detailed demographic data (e.g., household composition, educational and professional histories and the like). In addition, a series of questions was asked that paralleled questions posed to the students (about experiences of discrimination, plans for their children's educational future, and family relations). As with the student interviews, bilingual and bicultural RAs conducted the interviews in parents' language of choice (which with parents was always in their language of origin).

### *Bilingual Verbal Abilities Test administration*

The Bilingual Verbal Abilities Test (BVAT; Muñoz-Sandoval et al., 1998) was administered during the 3rd year of the study and again during the 5th (and last) year of the study. The test was administered early in the academic year in a session separate from the annual interview protocol. The test was individually administered in both the student's native language and in English in a session that tended to take 1 to 1 1/2 hours to complete.

## MEASURES

### *Instrument development*

Our study involved students from distinct language and cultural backgrounds. Cross-cultural research on immigrants forces us to reexamine the traditional social science assumptions around validity and reliability (McLoyd & Steinberg, 1998; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995).

Questions and prompts that are valid for one group may not be valid for another. The research measures available in the literature had not been developed and normed on immigrant non-English speaking populations, so we could not be confident that they would be culturally and linguistically relevant and equivalent across groups. It was a challenge to develop single instruments that captured the experiences of individuals from a variety of backgrounds. Informed by our fieldwork and our bicultural teams, we developed protocols that were relevant and equivalent across groups. In addition to cultural sensitivity, the scales we developed had considerable face validity. Structured interviews were translated into Spanish, Haitian Creole, Mandarin, and Cantonese by bilingual research teams. Interviews were piloted to establish age, cultural, and linguistic appropriateness before data collection began each year. We established the Cronbach's alpha measure of reliability for each of the scales and for each of the countries-of-origin participants (Knight & Hill, 1993), all of which generally fell within the high range.

#### *Demographic data*

Data regarding parental education, parental occupation, household income, and household structure were collected using standardized fixed-choice question formats imbedded in the 5th-year parent interviews.

#### *English language proficiency*

The English Language Proficiency Standard Score of the BVAT (Muñoz-Sandoval et al., 1998) was used to measure English language proficiency. The BVAT has been normed on all the languages represented in the study. The BVAT manual (Munoz-Sandoval et al., p. 68) reported the median reliability across age groups for the English Language Proficiency scale as .96.

#### *School violence*

This 10-item scale<sup>4</sup> was developed to determine the frequency with which students perceived problems of violence and bullying in their school and in the adjoining neighborhood (e.g., "I do not feel safe in my school"). Responses were coded on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*several times a day*; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77$ ).

### *Academic self-efficacy*

This seven-item scale<sup>5</sup> was developed to determine the degree to which the student felt empowered and capable of learning (e.g., “When I try hard I can learn almost anything”). Responses were coded on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*very false*) to 4 (*very true*; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .71$ ).

### *School-based supportive relationships*

This 11-item scale<sup>6</sup> was developed for this study through the iterative process described in the preceding section, Design and Procedures. It included statements assessing whether participants had meaningful and supportive relationships at school with peers and adults who could provide both emotional and tangible school-based support (e.g., “I can count on at least one adult in school”). Responses were coded on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .80$ ). In subsequent analyses, we disentangled items that specifically captured tangible<sup>7</sup> versus emotional functions<sup>8</sup> in relationships to examine their specific contributions to behavioral engagement.

### *Cognitive engagement*

This three-item scale<sup>9</sup> was developed to determine the degree to which the students are interested and intellectually engaged in what they are learning (e.g., “I enjoy learning new things”). Responses were coded on a 4-point scale (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .75$ ).

### *Behavioral engagement*

This seven-item scale<sup>10</sup> focused on the behaviors of academic engagement reported by the students. This scale assessed whether the students were completing the tasks necessary to be successful in school, including attending and participating in class and completing homework and course assignments. The behavioral engagement items divided students into two groups (e.g., “Some students turn in most of their homework on time/other students often do not turn in their homework on time”). Respondents were asked to determine whether they were more like the first or second group and then were asked whether the statement was either “sort of true” or “really true” for them. Scores ranged from 1 to 4, with higher scores indicating higher levels of engagement (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .79$ ).

### *Academic achievement*

Grades were the primary outcome measure of academic performance. Report cards were gathered for each participant during each year of the study. An academic grade point average (GPA) was calculated, averaging the grades for math, science, language arts, and social studies courses. Because the grading systems varied across school districts (with some using a 0–100 scale, others using an A–F scale, and still others using a  $\sqrt{+}$ ,  $\sqrt{}$ ,  $\sqrt{-}$  system), we developed a GPA that ranged from 1 to 5, with 1 being equivalent to an F or a grade under 60 on a 100-point scale, and 5 being equivalent to an A or a 90 and above on a 100-point scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$  for each year of GPA was the reliability of those four items added together).

### *Qualitative data*

The qualitative analyses were based on data gathered from the open-ended questions contained in the annual structured interviews. These formal interviews were conducted with students during each of the 5 years of the study and with their parents during the first and last years of the study. The data were organized and analyzed with the aid of two software programs—FolioViews and ATLAS/ti. These programs facilitated the inductive and deductive development and application of codes across data sources, as well as the creation of conceptual models from our results (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

During the 3rd year of the study and every year thereafter, we wrote and updated “illustrative case studies” (Yin, 2003) of 75 key study participants (15 students from each of the five immigrant groups). These 75 key participants represented a range of academic profiles, including those who did very well academically in school, those who performed adequately, and those who performed poorly and appeared to be completely disengaged. We prepared structured guidelines for developing the case studies of these key participants, which drew on a range of sources of data, including parent interviews, student interviews, and teacher interviews, as well as behavior checklists, grades, standardized tests, structured narrative techniques, and ethnographic observations. The RAs were trained in the case study procedure and wrote detailed drafts of case studies using the guidelines we had given them. Each year, the 75 case studies were expanded and enriched with new emerging data.

When we began developing these case studies, we had no way of predicting the particular twists and turns that each child's journey would take. At the end of the study, we ran Nagin cluster analyses and

determined five trajectories of performance—consistently high; consistently low; declining slowly (by half a grade); declining precipitously (by more than a grade and a half); and improving over the course of the 5 years of the study. Once we had determined the final patterns of performance using the entire data set, we classified each of the 75 case studies according to the Nagin cluster they fell into. We then read through and recoded the case studies that, over the course of the 5 years of the study, fell within each of the achievement trajectories. A detailed analysis of this rich case study data set is beyond the scope of the present discussion and is described elsewhere (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007). In this article, we present our relevant qualitative findings and the case studies of two students—one high achiever and one low achiever—who represent two extremes of academic performance. The qualitative data and case studies bring our findings to life by focusing on the role of contexts and relationships in students' academic trajectories.

#### PREDICTING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE & ENGAGEMENT

How students do in school is determined by a variety of institutional factors (such as exposure to a violent school environments, having only one parent in the home, and being an ethnic or racial minority male) and individual factors (such as English language proficiency and behavioral, cognitive, and school-based supportive relationships.) Here we used GPA to represent academic performance.

The means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables of interest are presented in Table 2. If there was a significant correlation between the predictor variable and our outcome variables (greater than or equal to the .05 level), the variable was included in our model.

In a stepwise regression with academic achievement as measured by GPA from the final year of participation in the study as our outcome variable, the following predictors were included in the model: country of origin, gender, age, English language proficiency, students' perceptions of school violence, and students' academic behavioral engagement. After four steps, four variables remained, collectively accounting for 26% of the variance,  $F_{(4,266)} = 22.91$ ,  $p < .001$ . English language proficiency,  $R^2 = .15$ ,  $p < .001$ , behavioral engagement,  $R^2 = .07$ ,  $p < .001$ , and being female,  $R^2 = .03$ ,  $p < .01$ , were all positively associated with GPA. Perceptions of school violence were negatively associated with GPA,  $R^2 = .02$   $p < .01$ . Countries of origin and age were not selected by the stepwise procedure.

GPA is highly related to perceptions of school violence and gender, and English language skills are associated with better academic outcomes. Further, engaging in behaviors such as attending school, participating in

**Table 2. Correlations for the Study Variables**

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	7a	7b	8	9	10
Outcomes														
1. GPA	3.69	1.15	1											
2. Behavioral Engagement	12.34	2.54	.34***	1										
Institutional Predictors <sup>#</sup>														
3. Two-Parent Household	.68	.47	.23**	.19**	1									
4. Gender	.57	.5	.25***	.17**	ns	1								
5. Paternal Employment	.64	.48	.15*	.18**	.13*	ns	1							
6. Perceptions of School Violence	24.37	3.97	-.31***	-.29***	-.18**	-.16**	-.16**	1						
Individual Predictors														
7. School-Based Supportive Relationships	36.54	5.04	.18**	.44***	ns	.12*	ns	ns	1					
7a. Emotional school-based support	12.78	2.51	.20**	.39***	ns	.12*	ns	ns		1				
7b. Tangible school-based support	10.08	1.64	ns	.25***	ns	.12*	ns	ns		.59***	1			
8. Cognitive Engagement	11.66	.19	.14*	.40***	ns	.ns	ns	ns	.42***	.37***	.25***	1		
9. Self-Efficacy	19.18	2.3	ns	.20***	ns	ns	ns	ns	.24***	.22***	.14**	.31***	1	
10. English Language Proficiency	91.45	19.43	.32***	.20***	-.20***	ns	.18**	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	1

Note: <sup>#</sup> We also examined the correlations between several additional institutional predictors to our outcomes of interest. Age, maternal employment, maternal education, and paternal education were all nonsignificant.

<sup>#</sup># If more than 10% of the data were missing, we did not use the construct in the regression because we would be unable to determine its impact on the data.

\* < *p*.05. \*\* < *p*.01. \*\*\* < *p*.001.

class, and completing homework lead to higher grades. But how can we account for behavioral engagement?

In our stepwise regression analysis with behavioral engagement as our outcome variable, the following institutional and individual predictors were included in the model: country of origin, gender, school violence, English language proficiency, self-efficacy, cognitive engagement, and school-based supportive relationships. After eight steps, eight variables remained, collectively accounting for 36% of the variance,  $F_{(8,271)} = 19.34$ ,  $p < .001$ . School-based supportive relationships,  $R^2 = .17$ ,  $p < .001$ , being from China,  $R^2 = .04$ ,  $p < .01$ , cognitive engagement,  $R^2 = .03$ ,  $p < .01$ , and self-efficacy,  $R^2 = .01$ ,  $p < .05$ , were all positively associated. On the other hand, perceptions of school violence,  $R^2 = .09$ ,  $p < .001$ , were negatively associated with behavioral engagement. Gender, English language proficiency, and being from Mexico (with a negative association) were

retained in the model but were not found to be significant. Being from other origin countries (Central America, Dominican Republic, or Haiti) was not selected by the stepwise procedure.

We were curious to tease apart the effects of feeling emotionally cared for and supported from the more tangible school-based supports of help with schoolwork and homework. Hence, we selected specific items that captured these two separate concepts—emotional school-based support and tangible school-based support. Using essentially the same model that we used to predict behavioral engagement, we substituted these two new constructs for the school-based supportive relationships construct. After eight steps, eight variables remained, collectively accounting for 35 percent of the variance,  $F_{(8,271)} = 8.23$ ,  $p < .001$ . We obtained nearly identical results as with the previous regression, with emotional school-based support nearly replacing school-based supportive relationships in the overall model,  $R^2 = .15$ ,  $p < .001$ . Strikingly, the tangible school-based support was not selected by the stepwise regression.

#### UNPACKING THE ROLE OF RELATIONS IN ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE

Our conceptual model posited that a variety of factors would influence the academic and behavioral outcomes of immigrant youth. Among these many factors, school-based supportive relationships stood out as a key influence on academic engagement. We now turn to the qualitative data to further explore the role of relationships both inside and outside school in supporting school engagement and performance. The qualitative narratives of the students and parents in our study vividly illustrate the kind and quality of relationships that immigrant children have with their parents, peers, teachers, and other adults in their communities. Excerpts from the ethnographic interviews and a comparative analysis of two representative case studies complement our quantitative findings and highlight the processes by which school-based supportive relationships can impact students' outcomes.

#### PEERS

Children in the study often spoke about the importance of conational peers in their lives as they acclimated to a new country, a new neighborhood, and a new school. Peers were often described as providing an emotional sense of belonging and acceptance, as well as tangible help with homework assignments, language translations, and orientation to school (Gibson et al., 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2004). To newly arrived immigrant

students, the companionship of conational friends seemed to be especially important because these peers served as important sources of information on school culture. "I hung out with friends from my country because they spoke Spanish, because they told me the things I didn't understand," noted a 14-year-old Mexican girl. Similarly, a 16-year-old Dominican girl explained, "When you come here, you don't know English. Your friends help you with English, with classes, and with showing you the school." Hence, peers can act as "vital conduits" (Stanton-Salazar, 2004) of information to disoriented newcomer students.

A 14-year-old Dominican boy echoed and elaborated on these sentiments, introducing the concept that peers can serve as buffers against the violence and drugs that are of special threat to boys in the low-income communities in which so many immigrants live:

Other students from my country gave me courage to come to school because at the beginning I didn't like to go to school. I found it strange and different. When I missed school, they called to give me the new homework assignment. They would tell me who not to hang around with and they would tell me not to get into bad things like gangs and marijuana.

In addition to the tangible forms of support, guidance, and protection that peers offered one another, students in the study also described the ways in which their peers supported them emotionally, serving as buffers to loneliness and embarrassment and bolstering self-confidence and self-efficacy. Peers were often described as providing important emotional sustenance that supported the development of significant psychosocial competencies. A 16-year-old from Central America noted, "I have a lot of friends and I don't feel alone." A 14-year-old from the Dominican Republic explained,

When I don't understand, I feel stupid when I ask my teacher. Sometimes even when it's explained several times, I just don't understand how to do it. It makes me feel bad. When I ask my friends, I don't feel as bad because they are my friends and they show me I can do it.

Though many peers were described as modeling positive academic behavior and establishing constructive academic norms, others served to distract their classmates from performing optimally in school (Gándara, 2004). A 17-year-old Mexican girl summed up three of the most commonly cited aspects of negative peer influence on academic

performance—“They invite us to cut class, use drugs, and tease us for wanting to study”—thus articulating how peers may encourage maladaptive academic behavior, promote drug use, and discourage competent academic behavior. Furthermore, peers may contribute to unsafe school and community environments, which can undermine students’ ability to concentrate, their sense of security, and their ability to experience trusting relationships in school. As a 16-year-old girl from Central America remarked, “Sometimes there are fights in school. This causes problems for me because I think about these fights instead of my work.” A 14-year-old from Haiti likewise stated, “I don’t like it when kids are bad at school—like to the teachers, when kids don’t listen and try to beat up the teachers.”

Parents also voiced concerns about the violent environments of the schools that their children attended. The mother of a 15-year-old Central American boy remarked, “The role of the school is to educate the students the best that they can so that they can have a better future. But unfortunately, there are many terrible things going on in schools, many delinquent students killing others. It is very sad because the students feel unsafe.”

#### TEACHERS, SCHOOL PERSONNEL, AND ADULTS IN THE COMMUNITY

Nonparental adults (Rhodes, 2002) in the school and community served an important role in easing newly arrived immigrant students’ cultural transitions. Students also perceived that teachers and other school- and community-based adults offered protection and provided critical encouragement, support, and advice. As a young man from the Dominican Republic put it, “Teachers treat us well and watch out for our safety. When I came here, I didn’t speak English and I didn’t know how things were here. But one teacher helped me out and would explain things to me in Spanish.”

After-school and tutoring programs are of critical importance to immigrant students in providing them with both homework help and information about the college admissions process. A 14-year-old from Haiti noted, “They help you with your homework a lot. When you come home your parents don’t have to check it because it’s already corrected.” These programs also provide information to newcomer students about the American higher education system that immigrant parents, unfamiliar with education in this country, cannot. A 17-year-old Mexican girl commented of Upward Bound, “They told me all I needed to get into the university.”

Adults in the community are another source of tangible and emotional support to immigrant youth. Often these adults are conationals who make up an extended network of support for the children, helping them obtain necessary school supplies and offering essential words of encouragement. A 16-year-old Central American girl said of the adults in her neighborhood,

They ask me if I need anything for school. If we go to a store and I see a notebook, they ask me if I want it. They give me advice, tell me that I should be careful of the friends I choose. They also tell me to stay in school to get prepared. They tell me I am smart. They give me encouragement.

On the other hand, study participants also spoke of the indifference, cultural insensitivity, and the discrimination they experienced while interacting with some adults. Lamentably, all too often, those adults were teachers. Some informants spoke longingly about a desire for a greater sense of closeness and understanding with their teachers, as did a 14-year-old from China, who reported, “Most of my teachers are quite cold. I wish they would care more about my feelings.” The mother of a 17-year-old from Central America complained,

From the moment my daughter arrived at school, her teacher only spoke to her in English. But she didn’t know any English. But the teachers—especially the Latino ones—should know you don’t learn English in a day, you learn little by little. For this reason, my daughter doesn’t want to go to school.

Many parents complained of an unwelcoming context of reception in school (Olsen, 1997) that contributed to their children’s academic disengagement. Parents found it particularly distressing when even conational teachers and school personnel did not seem responsive to the needs and struggles of these newly arrived students.

The preceding quotes serve to illustrate the ways in which school-based supportive relationships can either bolster or detract from newcomer students’ academic engagement and school performance. From the qualitative data, two distinct yet overlapping types of relational support emerged from the data—tangible school-based support and emotional school-based support. Tangible school-based support reflects the concrete and material supports offered to students, such as help with homework, sharing of resources, and offering of advice. Emotional school-based support is characterized by the emotional connections, or feelings of support and

closeness, that students develop with the people around them. Emotional school-based support provides a sense of safety and protection; it helps students build specific skills, confidence, and a sense of self-efficacy. It serves to keep students engaged as they encounter inevitable obstacles in their academic paths.

## PARENTAL AND FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Although school-based relationships are essential in supporting academic engagement and performance, we found that family relationships also played a critical role in supporting school performance. Many of the students spoke of the complex combination of love, affection, appreciation, gratitude, responsibility, and sense of duty (Fulgini & Pederson, 2002) that characterized their relationships with their families and influenced their academic and behavioral choices. A 15-year-old Dominican girl poignantly articulated,

One of the most important successes in life is to study, because without a good education there is no life. That is why some of our parents have had to work in factories. They work hard to give us a good education so that we can have a good future, not a future like theirs. Their dream is to see us become lawyers so we can represent our family, our last name, our country.

A 17-year-old Central American girl offered a similar sentiment, highlighting the invaluable impact of parental support:

My goal is to go to the university and get a career. I'm doing it for myself, for my family, to help them when I have my career. My parents think these are good goals so I can get ahead and earn money for happiness. But I have to do the work. My parents' support is the best inheritance they could give me.

Students in the study repeatedly voiced their keen understanding and appreciation of their parents' sacrifices and struggles on their behalf. A 14-year-old Haitian girl said, "She is a good mother. She fights for us, struggles for us. And she's a single mother so she does it all alone." But although many students described their desire to "give back" to their parents by doing well in school and going on to college, at times their parents had different views about the best ways for their children to meet their familial obligations. An 18-year-old Haitian girl in her senior year of high school explained,

We have different views on things, like what jobs I should do. They want me to get a job right after high school. They don't want me to go to college. My goal is to go to college, but my mom doesn't want me to. She wants me to get a job instead to make money so I can help them out.

The kinds of relational supports that parents were able to provide varied widely among the participants. Many parents and students described the tangible and emotional support they gave and received in the form of homework help, advice, encouragement, and care. The Central American mother of a 17-year-old remarked, "To help my children succeed in this country, I keep up with their school life, help them study, and feed them good food." Of her parents, a Central American 16-year-old said, "My dad explains things to me if I don't understand. They always want the best for us. They leave us in peace after school so we can keep studying."

Although it was clear from our interview data that the majority of immigrant parents were deeply concerned about their children's education and supported them as best they could, many were challenged in their abilities to help their children with their schoolwork (García-Coll et al., 2002). Because of their limited proficiency with English or limited experience with the educational system in their country of origin and in their new homeland, many immigrant parents were unable to offer academic assistance to their children. Furthermore, because many immigrant parents work long hours in inflexible low-wage jobs, they often are not available to help their children during after-school hours or to attend school meetings during the day. A 14-year-old Chinese boy remarked that he could not ask his mother for help with his assignments because she was "never home." "I seldom see her," he continued, "but as far as I know, she isn't good at my schoolwork. It is impossible for me to ask her to help me with my English. She, herself, is going to night school right now. Her English is not that good." A 14-year-old Dominican boy echoed this sentiment: "I don't ask my parents for help because they are always working and when they get home they are tired and I don't like to bother them much."

The mother of a 14-year-old Chinese girl described a common dilemma faced by immigrant parents when the economic survival of the family is at odds with the educational well-being of their children:

Nowadays, parents are busy making a living, which is very important for them. They work long hours so they are alienated from their kids' schools. Basically, they don't know how their kids are

doing in school, they don't know how the school operates. Education is very important for kids. But sometimes I feel that for Chinese families, they work very hard to get here so they don't give much attention to their kids' education. For them the most important thing is to make a living, to survive. How can you talk about education when you don't even have enough to eat? How can you talk about something else when you cannot maintain the basic living level? This is true from a certain perspective. However, if you think deeper, why did you come over here? What did you come here for?

These poignant statements by parents of newly arrived immigrant youth provide insight into why nonparental adults are so critical to easing the journey of recently arrived immigrant youth. They provide not only emotional support in a difficult period of transition but also information and skills that can lead to academic success.

## TWO STUDENTS: HENRY AND ROSA

The case studies of Henry and Rosa<sup>11</sup> demonstrate the ways in which the kind and quality of peer, nonparental adult, and family supports have impacted the scholastic outcomes of two immigrant students who experienced very different academic trajectories.

### *Henry*

Henry's story vividly illustrates the "immigrant paradox" that is characteristic of so many of the students in the study. Henry emigrated from a coastal city in China with his mother when he was 12 years old. Although Henry began his academic career in the United States with high expectations of himself and with a great deal of academic potential, he showed a dramatic academic disengagement over time.

As a newly arrived seventh grader, Henry voiced his ambitions to attend an Ivy League university and become an architect, genetic engineer, or scientist. He appeared to be on track to reach these goals. Henry and his mother lived in a community where many Chinese immigrants settled because of the relatively good quality of the schools. He did very well academically in his Cantonese/English bilingual middle-school program and received high grades in all his classes. Henry was one of only two students from this program to gain entry into an elite high school that required a competitive exam for admission. In this middle school

program, he received critical guidance from a bilingual school counselor who was a fierce advocate for her students. It was widely agreed by this counselor, his mother, his teachers, and Henry himself that he was a capable, promising student with a bright future.

Henry's academic performance plummeted, however, after he transitioned to high school. In large part, his English language ability had not developed enough to allow him to negotiate the academic and social demands of his new educational environment. In his bilingual middle school, Henry had had positive relationships with his teachers and counselor. He was comfortable asking them questions and for advice. In contrast, in his English-only competitive high school classrooms, Henry felt alienated from his teachers and was reluctant to ask questions. He reported feeling exasperated and isolated in his new school. Within months, his disengagement was evident; he regularly cut classes and began failing multiple courses. After a year, Henry was transferred to a less competitive high school. By the end of the study, even in the new school, Henry had failed numerous classes, repeated a grade, and had a GPA of 2.1.

Relationally, Henry was quite isolated both inside and outside school. The son of a single mother who left his father because of domestic violence, Henry reported that his relational network comprised only two people: his mother and his ex-girlfriend. The other person he named as "important" in his life was his aunt, who, he poignantly reported, had died 8 years earlier. Henry's mother was rarely at home because she worked full time and attended English language classes in the evening. She reported having no control over Henry and no knowledge of his academic performance. She did not express concerns about her lack of involvement in her son's life, noting that as he was a boy, he "would do as he pleases." Even though they lived in a Chinese ethnic enclave, Henry and his mother had little contact with their neighbors. Whereas many of their neighbors worked within the Chinese niche economy, Henry's mother proudly worked in a bureaucratic state institution, bringing her in only occasional contact with her conationals. Lonely and disengaged, Henry spent much of his time in the streets of his urban environment, sometimes failing to return home for days on end.

Despite his obvious academic decline over time, Henry consistently claimed to be smarter than the other students and his teachers. Henry projected an off-putting and arrogant attitude that may have served as a defense against his own fear of failure but that also served to alienate him from peers and adults alike. He had little family support or guidance and was unable to develop protective, nurturing relationships with friends,

teachers, or other adults outside the home who, if not for his distancing behavior, might otherwise have reached out to help him navigate academic pathways.

### *Rosa*

In contrast to Henry's relatively isolated milieu, Rosa's world was distinguished by a supportive web of mutually satisfying relationships with family members, peers, and teachers. Rosa, who emigrated with her family from Mexico when she was 13 years old, exemplifies a highly relationally and academically engaged immigrant student who remained successful over time.

Rosa attended a blighted high school in an urban setting where gang violence was a regular occurrence. Nevertheless, throughout her high school career, Rosa did exceptionally well, ranking third in her class of 369 and gaining entry with scholarships to UC Berkeley, where her father worked as a janitor. Although monolingual Spanish speaking when she entered American schools, Rosa quickly acquired the academic English necessary to excel academically. Rosa was widely described by her peers and teachers as a lovely, popular, and appealing adolescent to whom people were drawn. She reported experiencing the feeling that "everyone is rooting for me."

Rosa's immediate family of two parents and six siblings was cohesive and supportive and had close ties with an extended network of relatives and neighbors who offered Rosa additional support and supervision. Rosa's parents were well-educated professionals in Mexico. Though upon migrating they found work as janitors, they referred to their dramatically diminished social position as a sacrifice they gladly endured to ensure their children a more prosperous future. A computer that Rosa's parents worked hard to purchase was a centerpiece in the family's home. The dining table, where large, nourishing family meals were served, functioned as the other center of family activity. Rosa's two older siblings, one of whom was in college and the other a senior in high school, were strong role models for Rosa's continued academic success. Rosa, in turn, helped her younger siblings with their homework and spent time each day helping her parents at home doing chores.

Rosa's involvement in the programs Upward Bound and Alma Latina gave her access to tangible school-based support in negotiating the maze of her large, impoverished high school and offered strategies to manage the college admissions process. These organizations also served to promote Rosa's connections to her cultural heritage. Additionally, Rosa was

mentored by a college dean who provided her with guidance that sustained her confidence in moments of self-doubt. In spite of the aversive school and neighborhood factors that Rosa faced, the alignment of family, individual characteristics, and school and community relational supports propelled her to a highly successful academic outcome.

### *Comparing cases*

A comparison of these two case studies highlights the factors that precipitated Henry's disengagement from school and those that attenuated risk for Rosa and contributed to her success. Rosa possesses the characteristics that are associated with higher levels of engagement and better academic outcomes: being female, having more educated parents, and having two parental figures in the home. Furthermore, the quality of relationships that Rosa was able to forge at home, in school, and in her community (due in no small part to her appealing personality characteristics) had a protective, positive influence on her educational achievement. For Henry, these supports were sadly lacking.

Gender roles and expectations feature prominently as mediators of these students' academic outcomes. Rosa had more responsibilities at home than did Henry, who spent his free time in the streets of his neighborhood where he was exposed to higher levels of violence. Rosa's closeness to her family fostered a healthy sense of responsibility that inspired her to persevere in school and in life, whereas Henry's alienation from his mother and community contributed to his sense of isolation, despair, and disengagement in social and educational contexts.

Family expectations clearly affected the academic attitudes and aspirations of these two students. Rosa's parents had higher educational levels and were better able to provide the types of resources (like a home computer) that placed their child at an educational advantage. Henry's mother, on the other hand, had little ability to monitor Henry's academic progress, rendering him more vulnerable to academic failure. Furthermore, Rosa had an extended close-knit family network, whereas Henry's single mother had no ties to an extended network of adults in her family or community who could help her supervise or support her son. Rosa's school-based network of relations included peers, teachers, after-school agency adults and mentors, which included coethnics who offered her significant tangible and emotional supports, whereas Henry did not have such relationships. The importance of close supportive relationships in the academic engagement and outcomes of immigrant-origin youth are clearly demonstrated by the stories of these two students.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, we explored factors that influence the academic performance of newcomer immigrant youth, with a particular focus on the role of relationships in mediating academic engagement and achievement. After describing demographic characteristics of the sample and identifying relevant differences related to education, income, and countries of origin, we began with an analysis of academic outcomes that examined several factors that contribute to GPA—a crude but often used proxy for academic performance. We considered the roles of age, gender, country of origin, parental education, parental employment, family structure, and exposure to violent school environments in relation to GPA. We found that grades were positively correlated with being female, having two parents in the home, and having a father who worked. We also found that students' perceptions of school violence were negatively related to grades. Gender and perceptions of school violence also served as predictors of our GPA model. This finding is consistent with previous research that has uncovered associations between students' perceptions of their school climates and their academic functioning (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, Emmons, & Blatt, 1997; Way, 1998; Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007). These findings suggest that immigrant youth who experience their schools as threatening and violent may be particularly vulnerable to the development of academic problems.

We also were interested in examining the role of student-level variables in academic performance. Hence, we considered the roles of English language proficiency, behavioral engagement, and self-efficacy in predicting grades. Consistent with the findings of Portes and Rumbaut (2001), English language skill exerted an understandable influence on academic achievement; students with higher levels of English skills were more likely to get better grades. Behavioral engagement was found to be a robust predictor of academic performance: The more the student engaged in the behaviors necessary to do well in school, such as attending classes, completing school work, and doing homework, the more likely he or she was to do well in school. The correlation between self-efficacy and GPA was not significant, though it later was found to play a role in predicting behavioral engagement.

We then turned to more closely examine the factors implicated in academic behavioral engagement. An interesting finding was that age and gender, family structure, maternal education, and parental employment were not strongly predictive of behavioral engagement. Gender, although highly correlated to behavioral engagement, lost any significant

predictive value when taken with other factors. Being from China was positively associated with behavioral engagement. Cognitive engagement, self-efficacy, and, in particular, school-based supportive relationships all played critical roles in augmenting behavioral engagement. School-based supportive relationships proved to be the most robust of the individual contributing factors, which suggests that supportive relationships in school led to students making greater efforts in their schoolwork.

Conceptually, we unpacked two dimensions of school-based supportive relationships—tangible and emotional school-based supports. The two dimensions were found to be quite distinct. In our statistical model, the emotional school-based support dimension emerged as the most significant variable in behavioral engagement, almost supplanting the school-based supportive relationship variable altogether. Our qualitative data, however, shed light on how both emotional school-based supports and tangible school-based supports were experienced by our participants as being integral to their academic engagement and performance.

Our findings are consistent with research that has suggested that positive supportive relationships are particularly important for newcomer immigrant students to bridge the gap between home and school cultures and provide important feelings of safety and opportunities for success in the school setting (Baker, 1999; Rumberger, 2004; Wang, Haertel, & Wahlberg, 1994). Supportive relationships with teachers may, for example, augment active participation in subject domains that may have traditionally held little interest for students. Caring relationships in school appear also to attenuate the effects of school violence and enhance feelings of belonging in the school setting, which in turn have implications for academic adjustment (Conchas, 2001; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Supportive relationships with caring adults outside the school context provide emotional sustenance and practical help and advice for newcomers. Nurturing, supportive relationships are important for all students, but they are of particular importance for immigrant youth adjusting to a new country, a new language, and a new educational context. These youth are critically in need of caring role models, cultural interpreters, and academic guides.

Taken together, these findings suggest that efforts to understand and bolster immigrant students' relational, cognitive, and behavioral engagement are likely to yield important academic payoffs. Any attempts to improve prospects for immigrant youth should consider the importance of caring relationships in supporting academic outcomes. Practices that enrich school-based supportive relationships with both peers and school-based adults, including fostering nurturing safe environments, creating

advisory groups, grouping students in smaller multiyear cohorts, and the like, would serve to enhance both the relational and the academic engagement of immigrant youth.

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### *Notes*

1. Defined here as those who have been in the country less than 5 years.
2. Central American countries represented were El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua.
3. Over three quarters of the 407 students interviewed in the first year of the study also participated in the fifth interview wave ( $N = 309$ ). We assessed the significance of differences at baseline between those who completed the study and those who started in the study but dropped out to determine if they had any specific characteristics that might affect outcomes or might lead us to misinterpret our findings (such as would have been the case if the lowest performing students in the beginning of the study might have dropped out of the study at greater rates than students who began the study as high performers.) We examined differences in over 40 constructs including grades for Year 1, sociodemographic and family characteristics, experience with migration, schooling, mental health, language barriers, and social supports, among others. Statistical differences were examined using chi-square measures of association (for categorical variables) and  $t$  tests (for continuous variables) for both student and parent interviews. We found only a few significant differences: Students of Chinese origin had higher completion rates (90%) than Dominicans, Mexicans, and Central Americans (approximately 75%) and Haitians (69%); more girls than boys completed the five interviews (81% compared with 70%), and noncompleters were attending the most highly “toxic” schools as measured by reports of having witnessed violence (37% compared with 23%). In all other respects, the group of students who began the study were nearly identical to those who completed the study.
4. The school violence scale items were: I do not feel safe in my school; My school is badly affected by crime and violence in the community; I feel unsafe on my way to and from school; Someone in school does a good job of stopping kids from making trouble (reversed); Gangs make me feel unsafe in school; I frequently see students getting into fights; I frequently see students threatening or bullying each other; I frequently see students carrying weapons; I frequently see students exchanging, selling, or offering drugs; I frequently see racial or ethnic conflicts.
5. Self-efficacy items were: I feel like I do well in school; It is easy for me to learn most things; Even when I study hard, I cannot do well on tests (reversed); When I try hard, I can learn most things; I can get good grades even when I do not try hard; There is no way a student like me can get good grades; I think I am a smart person.
6. School-based supportive relationships items were: I can count on at least one adult in school; No one in school can help me (reversed); Teachers do not treat me with respect (reversed); I have at least one friend at school to help me with homework; Teachers care about me and what happens to me; I can count on someone if I have problems at school;

Teachers do not care about my future (reversed); Someone at school makes me feel successful; School is lonely where no one cares about me (reversed); I can count on someone in school to help me with my schoolwork; I can talk about troubles with people at school.

7. Tangible school-based support items were: No one in school can help me (reversed); I have at least one friend at school to help me with homework; I can count on someone in school to help me with my schoolwork

8. Emotional school-based support items included the following: I can count on at least one adult in school; Teachers care about me and what happens to me; I can count on someone if I have problems at school; I can talk about troubles with people at school.

9. Cognitive engagement items were: I enjoy learning new things; I get bored easily with school work; I feel good when I learn something new even when it is hard.

10. Behavioral engagement items were: Some students always finish their work but other students often do not finish it; Some students always turn in their homework on time but other students often do not; Some students pay close attention in class but others do not; Some students just get by in school but others always try their best (reversed); Hours generally spent on homework after school; How many times late to class in the last week; How many times skipped classed in the last week.

11. Henry and Rosa are pseudonyms.

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