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Newcomer Immigrant Students’ Perspectives on What Affects Their Homework Experiences

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ABSTRACT. The author examined how characteristics related to individual, family, and school environments contribute to immigrant students’ homework completion. Participants were 192 newcomers in an urban high school designed to serve English language learners. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted with data compiled from a larger project on role of homework in immigrant adolescents’ academic lives. The author found that students’ homework completion is shaped by (a) gender, engagement in school, homework environment and learning styles; (b) parental homework support and family conflict; and (c) perceived school violence and school homework supports. The effect of perceived school violence on homework completion differed for boys and girls. Boys’ homework completion was more adversely affected by higher perceptions of violence at school than that of girls.

Keywords: ecological systems, gender, homework, immigrant youth

Recent educational reform initiatives in the United States have focused attention on raising students’ academic achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Schools are held accountable for ensuring that all children, including English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities, make adequate progress toward achieving standards aligned with the general curriculum. In this climate, homework has emerged as a potential vehicle to improve achievement (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006).

Among students who could potentially benefit from the learning opportunities offered by homework is the increasing population of immigrant adolescents. One in five children in the U.S. today has at least one foreign-born parent; these students comprise the fastest growing segment of the school-aged population (Hernández, Denton, & Macartney, 2007). Because many immigrant children learn English and complex academic subjects simultaneously, they often lag behind their native-born English-speaking peers in academic achievement (Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008). One way to bridge this gap is through the thoughtful assignment of homework.

Because homework can be tailored to individual students’ learning needs, appropriately designed assignments can offer valuable learning opportunities for immigrant youth who need to review course materials and practice specific skills. However, there is limited research on the academic and developmental needs of newcomer immigrant adolescents; thus, secondary schools are often ill-equipped to address the needs of these newcomers (Ruiz-de-Velasco, Clewell, & Fix, 2001; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). Yet schools represent the primary context of acculturation for immigrant youth, and performance in secondary grades has significant implications for students’ decision to continue on to college. Because research shows strong positive relationships between high school achievement and homework completion (Cooper et al., 2006), each homework assignment that is out of reach for immigrant students places them at a position of cumulative disadvantage—for failed opportunities to learn, negative teacher perceptions (Weinstein, 2002), lower academic self-efficacy (Schunk, 1991), and academic disengagement over time (Goslin, 2003). Thus, educators need to be informed of factors that facilitate or challenge immigrant students’ homework experiences, so that steps can be taken to help them derive maximal benefit from homework.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), which recognizes that academic performance is linked to various characteristics in students’ family and school ecologies (Benner, Graham, & Mistry, 2008; Chung & Steinberg, 2006). The ecological systems and the processes that occur within each system are interrelated; the persons or characteristics of one ecological system can influence those found in another system.

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The ecological systems model provides a framework for understanding how various individual, home, and school environment characteristics contribute to newcomer immigrant students’ homework completion. Specifically, the following sets of characteristics are examined: (a) individual characteristics (gender, region of origin, academic engagement, learning styles and preferences), (b) home environment factors (family conflict, parental homework support), and (c) school environment factors (school climate, perceived violence, school homework support). An objective of this study was to identify the relative contribution of each set of characteristics on newcomer immigrant youth’s homework completion, and how the influence of a characteristic in one set (e.g., academic engagement) varies as a function of another characteristic in a different set (e.g., parental homework help).

Individual Characteristics

English proficiency and academic skills. Limited proficiency in English is a particular impediment to homework completion for immigrant youth, and the challenges are even greater for students with interrupted formal education, as they lack the basic academic skills needed to complete assignments and perform in school (August & Hakuta, 1997). Moreover, an individual not having developed strong literacy skills in his or her native language considerably decreases the chances of acquiring academic language skills in a second language (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006).

Additionally, the content of secondary school curricula becomes increasingly complex, and resources available in U.S. schools for adolescent ELLs are more limited in comparison to those available for younger ELLs (Ruiz-de-Velasco et al., 2001). Without solid instruction in content areas and language support to access the materials being taught in classes, immigrant youth are unlikely to acquire English proficiency regardless of the length of their time in the United States (Su´arez-Orozco et al., 2008).

Gender. Research on gender differences in doing homework has revealed that compared with boys, girls more frequently report using strategies such as managing their workspace, allocating their time, and monitoring their emotions while doing homework (Xu, 2006). Further, studies about relationships between achievement and self-regulated learning have shown that girls tend to have stronger mastery goal orientation, intrinsic motivation, and greater cognitive engagement than boys (Ablard & Lipschultz, 1998); thus, boys may be at greater risk of becoming disengaged in school.

Studies on gendered patterns among immigrant or ethnic minority youth have further suggested that girls tend to be perceived more favorably by teachers than boys (López, 2003). In a study on immigrant boys’ experiences in U.S. schools (Su´arez-Orozco & Qin-Hillard, 2004), researchers found that teachers saw immigrant girls to be more successful academically and socially than boys. Girls were more likely to exert higher levels of behavioral engagement and have better relationships with peers and adults in schools.

Academic engagement. In broad terms, engagement is conceptualized as the extent to which students are involved in their classes and school-related activities (Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996). Engagement is a multifaceted construct that involves behavioral (e.g., effort, participation), emotional (e.g., enjoyment derived from learning), relational (e.g., sense of connectedness with peers and teachers), and cognitive dimensions (e.g., interest in a topic; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; National Research Council, 2004; Su´arez-Orozco, Pimentel, & Martin, 2009). The extent to which students are academically engaged in their classes significantly influences their performance in school (Fredricks et al., 2004; Su´arez-Orozco et al., 2008). In the present study, behavioral and cognitive dimensions of engagement were examined. Prior analyses on data involving newcomer immigrant students indicated that behavioral engagement is an important predictor of homework completion (Bang, Su´arez-Orozco, Pakes, & O’Connor, 2009). Furthermore, research shows that engagement is a prerequisite for learning (Goslin, 2003), and students need to be interested and intellectually engrossed in what is being taught in class in order to learn and be able to apply the skills in completing their homework.

Learning style and preferences. In doing homework, students have considerable freedom in the time, place, and social context in which to complete their assignments. Thus, students’ individual learning styles and preferences of when, where, and how they approach their assignments can affect their homework experiences. Assuming that individual students’ preferences for in- and out-of-school learning styles can be empirically distinguished, Milgram and Hong (1996) developed a comprehensive Homework Preference Questionnaire (HPQ) to assess the conditions in which a child preferred to learn at home. Categories of preference include: organization (e.g., order, place, time), surroundings (e.g., noise level, light, design of furniture), perceptual–physical (e.g., preference for assignments that involve listening, reading, or experiential activities), and interpersonal (e.g., preference for doing homework alone, with peers, or with adults). Studies based on data collected through the HPQ indicate that matching the homework environment to individual students’ learning styles and preferences results in increased levels of achievement in academic subjects and more positive attitudes toward homework (Hong & Milgram, 2000; Minniti, 2005).

Family Background and Home Environment

It is well established that positive associations exist between family demographic factors (e.g., socioeconomic status [SES], maternal education, parental employment, racial–ethnic background) and children’s achievement (e.g.,
Ferriss, 2006; Sirin, 2005). The SES of a family is among the most important demographic factors related to children’s development and academic performance. Thus, family background and home environment characteristics likely affect homework completion. Some of these effects are due to poverty (e.g., limited educational resources, parents working long hours, children having to work in order to support the family), whereas others are particular to immigrant families.

Family conflicts. Immigration is a stressful event that often brings about changes in the family system, causing some family relationships to be strained and conflictual (Falicov 1998; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). The process of migration and acculturation frequently involves separation and estrangement between family members, introduction of new members, and cultural/generational gap due to children’s and parents’ differential rates of adaptation to the U.S. culture (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Further, immigrant youth are often asked to take on responsibilities beyond their years, such as child care, translation, and negotiation, which can sometimes lead to exchange of roles between parents and children and thus undermine parental authority (Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hillard, 2004). Immigrant youth also confront the acculturative challenges of navigating two worlds and developing an identity that encompasses both cultures (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Suárez-Orozco, 2004). This acculturative stress can result not only in family tension, but also in deterioration of immigrant youths’ psychological well-being and academic engagement (García-Coll & Magnuson, 1997; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008).

Parental involvement. Immigrant parents are often unable to attend to their children’s schooling to the extent that parents of native-born, middle- to upper-class youth often do. Some may have received limited formal schooling or education in another language, and they may not be able to provide as much help with schoolwork as they would like. Immigrant youth may thus be at a disadvantage academically, as studies have linked parental involvement in their children’s schooling to improved achievement across grade levels and ethnic backgrounds (Balli, 1998; Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Nonetheless, parents can still be involved by providing emotional support and encouragement, ensuring that their children’s homework is completed, and minimizing noise and distractions (Xu, 2004).

School Environment

Student engagement and achievement are increased in school environments that ensure physical safety, promote positive social norms, provide opportunities to develop skills within warm, supportive relationships, and convey high expectations for academic achievement (e.g., Hoy & Sabo, 1998; Phillips, 1997; Shouse, 1997). Previous research involving immigrant students has indicated that many of them attend schools with high levels of poverty and segregation (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). Students in these contexts have limited access to educational resources and few opportunities to interact with peers of the dominant culture (Kozol, 2005). In some schools, ELLs may be isolated in English as a second language track, where they may experience unchallenging classes, low expectations, and embarrassment due to their slow acquisition of academic English (Olsen, 1997; Valdés, 1998). Further, problems such as lack of discipline and violence that often afflict high-poverty schools threaten the physical safety of students, leading them to focus their energies on remaining safe rather than on learning (Gronna & Chin-Chance, 1999; Prothrow-Stith & Quaday, 1995).

School homework support. The availability of someone who can provide homework help is associated with higher homework completion rates and greater enjoyment of the learning experience (Xu, 2005; Xu & Corno, 2003). For many youths, the often isolating experience of working on assignments instead of activities that involve socializing with others seems to contribute to their negative attitude toward homework (Xu, 2005). Especially for youths who are struggling in school, homework that is overly challenging, repetitive, uninteresting, or too lengthy can lead to frustration, impatience, low self-esteem, and low academic self-efficacy (Zimmermann & Kitsantas, 2005)

Homework help or tutoring programs, particularly those provided at the school by teachers, can be effective in facilitating students’ homework experiences. Such support systems set a place and time for students to complete their assignments, thus helping them manage their after-school hours efficiently and ensuring an environment that is conducive to academic work. By structuring students’ after-school schedules and offering educational resources, teachers and staff at homework help programs can further increase the time that students dedicate to academic work, and time spent on homework is generally positively associated with homework completion, accuracy, and achievement (Dotterer, McHale, & Croiter, 2007). Furthermore, newcomer immigrant youths can benefit from the language support provided by teachers, gain insight and learning strategies by working with peers, and develop skills in using reference materials that can help them in future assignments. Whether immigrant students have access to such help and resources can significantly impact their homework experiences and determine the success with which they complete their assignments.

This brief review is an outline of numerous factors that may shape immigrant students’ homework experiences. Although a significant body of literature exists on homework among mainstream students, little is known about the homework experiences of newcomer immigrant students. Because homework, particularly in high school, has been recognized to help students achieve in school (Cooper et al., 2006), and given newcomer immigrant students’ need
to acquire academic English language proficiency, research is needed to help develop a better understanding of the factors that influence homework experiences among this population.

Research Objective

This study is based on a subset of data that I collected for a broader project on the homework experiences and academic adaptation of recently arrived immigrant youth in the United States (Bang, 2009). I first utilized focus groups to gather reports from immigrant youth about the various factors that affect their homework completion. Through analyses of these data, I gained insight into students’ homework experiences, their home and school environments, and the associations between these contextual factors, individual characteristics, and homework completion. The qualitative data also informed my development of questions that were included in a subsequent survey about homework experiences. The analyses presented in this study are based on quantitative survey data; a main goal of the project was to understand how characteristics related to individual, family, and school environments contribute to newcomer immigrant students’ homework completion. By using hierarchical regression analyses, in which sets of variables were entered in separate blocks according to the order of proximity to the student as set up in the ecological models, the relative contribution of each set of factors to homework completion could be examined.

Method

Study Setting and Participants

Participants were students from International High School at Prospect Heights,1 a newcomer school in New York City (referred to hereafter as International High School). This school is a part of the International Network for Public Schools, a nonprofit organization that addresses the educational needs of recent immigrant students in Grades 9–12 who have limited proficiency in English. The study site is a promising setting for newcomer youth, and the International Network was recognized in 2009 by the Migration Policy Institute as one of four recipients of the E Pluribus Unum Prize, an annual award granted to exceptional initiatives that foster immigrant integration (Migration Policy Institute, 2009).

International High School first opened in 2004 and is one of the most recently established sites. It serves about 450 students, as one of four small schools housed in a building that was formerly a single high school; it accepts a diverse group of newcomer students who have spent less than 4 years in the United States at the time of admission. These students, who have scored at an intermediate level or below on the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT), come from over 50 different countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Central and South America. Some entered the school with a solid formal educational background, whereas others have had almost no formal schooling. As a school designed to serve first-generation newcomer immigrants, International High School was an appropriate site at which to conduct research focused on academic adaptation and homework experiences of recently arrived immigrant youth in a U.S. school.

Procedures

A brief presentation of the project was given before all teachers at International High School during a faculty meeting. All teachers expressed interest in the project; Institutional Research Board approvals were obtained from the author’s institution and the NYC Department of Education. Each teacher received permission forms and letters describing the study to parents to be distributed to students in their respective advisory groups. Various efforts were made to obtain signed parental permission forms (e.g., incentives, party for the advisory group with the highest return rate). Administrators and teachers also helped by requesting parents’ permission when they came to school for parent–teacher conferences, and almost all parents agreed to have their child participate in the project.

Survey administration times were scheduled to take place during 50-min independent reading periods that all students had on designated days of the week. A team of two to three trained bilingual research assistants administered the survey in each classroom; they also collected signed consent forms from the student participants. The survey was previously piloted with five high school students (of whom two were ELLs); the resultant survey was translated by professionals into six most common languages that were the primary languages of students at International High School: Spanish, Chinese, French, Kreyol, Bengali, and Arabic. Each translated survey was back-translated and reviewed by native speakers of the target language to assess whether the questions were linguistically and age-appropriate; they also examined the items to ensure that the intended meanings were accurately conveyed.

All ninth- and 10-grade students who were present on the survey day were asked to participate. A total of 192 students agreed to participate and completed the survey, corresponding to a response rate of 97%. The sample was balanced by student gender (for boys, n = 99, or 52%), and the mean student age was 16 years (SD = 1.07 years) and participants came from diverse regions: 11 (6%) from Africa, 55 (31%) from Caribbean, 44 (25%) from Central/South America, 25 (14%) from East Asia, 34 (19%) from South/Southeast Asia, and nine (5%) from Eastern Europe/other.

Measures

The survey included items in various domains. In addition to demographic characteristics, the constructs examined in
this study were homework completion, behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, learning styles, family conflict, parental homework support, perceived school violence, and school homework support.

**Homework completion.** Students reported the frequency with which they complete their homework assignments. Responses were scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (every day or almost every day; M = 3.33, SD = 1.12).

Behavioral engagement was a 10-item scale adapted from Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation (LISA) Study (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). The items in the scale assess the extent to which students carry out the tasks necessary to be successful in school (e.g., I paid attention in class). Respondents indicated the frequency with which they performed each task; answers were coded on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (every day or almost every day), with higher scores corresponding to higher levels of engagement (M = 3.15, SD = 0.63; Cronbach’s α = .73).

Cognitive engagement was a six-item scale developed from questions in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the LISA Study (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). It assessed the degree of students’ intellectual involvement and interest in what they are learning (e.g., I like new challenges). Responses were coded on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (every day or almost every day), with higher scales corresponding to higher levels of engagement (M = 3.26, SD = 0.57; Cronbach’s α = .83).

Homework learning style was a simplified subscale adapted from the Homework Motivation and Preferences Questionnaire (HMPQ; Hong & Milgram, 2000). This four-item scale assessed students’ preference for certain perceptual features or types (e.g., auditory, tactile) of homework assignments (e.g., I prefer to get the homework instructions in writing, I prefer homework where I do an experiment at home). Responses were coded on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree; M = 2.76, SD = 0.69; Cronbach’s α = .74), where higher scores indicated greater awareness of one’s learning style when doing homework.

Homework environment preference was also a simplified subscale adapted from the HMPQ (Hong & Milgram, 2000). This four-item measure assessed the structure and type of surrounding and setting in which students preferred to do homework (e.g., I like to do my homework sitting in a chair at a desk). Responses were coded on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree; M = 3.04, SD = 0.65; Cronbach’s α = .79); higher scores indicated a preference for a more structured setting in which to do homework.

Family conflict was an 11-item measure adapted from the Issues Checklist first developed by Prinz, Foster, Kent, and O’Leary (1979) to measure conflictual issues in parent–child relationships. Issues that are likely to be sources of conflict, particularly among immigrant youth and their parents were identified (e.g., getting low grades, having a lot of housework, being reunited with my parents after separation). Students reported whether they discussed a given issue with a family member in the past month and the intensity of their conversation about the topic. Responses were scored on a 3-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (calm) to 3 (angry; M = 12.6, SD = 9.06; Cronbach’s α = .86).

Parental homework support was a five-item measure based on Hoover-Dempsey et al.’s (2001) review of research on parental involvement in homework. Students were asked to indicate the specific ways in which their parents support homework efforts and the frequency with which such support was provided (e.g., How often do your parents watch over you while you do your homework? Check to see that your homework is done?) Answers were scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (every day or almost every day; M = 2.41, SD = 1.26, Cronbach’s α = .84).

Perceived school violence was a seven-item measure adapted from the LISA study student interview protocol and the Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics. Students were asked to report whether or not they took specific actions during this school year in order to avoid unsafe incidents (e.g., Take a special route to get to school. Stay away from certain places in the school). Responses were coded dichotomously (1 = yes, 0 = no; M = 2.27, SD = 2.19; Cronbach’s α = .75).

**Homework facilitators.** Students indicated specific school, home, or individual factors that help them in doing homework. A list of facilitators was generated based on focus group discussions and literature regarding students’ homework experiences. Students were asked, “Which of the reasons listed below make it EASY for you to do your homework?”; and they were to check all reasons that applied to them (e.g., I understand what was taught in class. I go to homework help sessions at school). Responses were coded dichotomously (1 = yes, 0 = no).

**Demographics.** Students were asked to answer several questions about themselves and their family. Gender was coded dichotomously, 0 for boys and 1 for girls. Years in the United States was calculated by subtracting the approximate date of arrival from the date of survey administration. Region of origin was created by grouping students from different regions (1 = Africa, 2 = Caribbean, 3 = Central/South America, 4 = East Asia, 5 = South/Southeast Asia, 6 = East Europe/other). Given a fairly strong correlation between mother’s and father’s education (Pearson r = .61, p < .001), maternal education was selected for use; the responses ranged from 1 (elementary school or less) to 6 (master’s or other professional degree; M = 2.78, SD = 1.52). Parental employment level indicated parents working outside the home: 1 (neither), 2 (one parent), and 3 (both parents; M = 2.18, SD = 0.83).
of standardized predicted outcome variable (homework completion) by standardized residuals for each independent variable. Random patterns across the entire range of standardized homework completion for all independent variables were observed. Collinearity statistics were calculated for each model examined; no values indicated multicollinearity.

**Predicting homework completion.** Correlations between the study variables were examined (Table 1). Several hierarchical regression models were specified; the model presented here is the one that explained the most variance in homework completion. Predictor variables were entered in blocks, grouped in the following way: The first block comprised demographic variables (Model 1), the second block included individual student characteristics (Model 2), the third block included home environment characteristics (Model 3), and the fourth block consisted of school environment characteristics (Model 4; see Table 2). With the addition of each block of variables, the changes in $R^2$ and the $\beta$ associated with each predictor were examined. Variables that did not contribute significantly to predicting homework completion in the final model were omitted to identify the most parsimonious model.

An examination of standardized beta coefficients showed that in Model 1, gender ($\beta = .17; \text{t}[189] = 2.37, p = .02$) and region of origin ($\beta = .15; \text{t}[189] = 2.06, p = .04$) were significant predictors of homework completion, jointly accounting for about 4% of the variance. Girls were more significantly likely to complete homework than boys. However, a comparison (one-way analysis of variance, not reported here) between the categories in region of origin indicated that there were no significant differences between one group and another in their homework completion.

Model 2 showed that when individual student characteristics were entered, behavioral engagement ($\beta = .27; \text{t}[185] = 4.20, p < .001$), cognitive engagement ($\beta = .16; \text{t}[185] = .

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**TABLE 1. Correlations of Regression Variables (Excluding Region of Origin, a Nominal Variable; N = 192)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>11</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>1. Gender</td>
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<td>2. HW completion</td>
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<td>3. Behavioral engagement</td>
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<td>4. Cognitive engagement</td>
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<td>.27***</td>
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<td>5. HW learning style</td>
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<td>.29***</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.29***</td>
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<td>6. HW environment preference</td>
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<td>.16*</td>
<td>.37***</td>
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<td>7. Family conflict</td>
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<td>-.22**</td>
<td>-.09</td>
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<td>-.06</td>
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<td>8. Parental HW support</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.05</td>
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<td>.14</td>
<td>.01</td>
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<td>9. Perceived school violence</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>-.12</td>
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<td>10. Understanding HW</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td>.23***</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>-.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. School HW program</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.06</td>
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</table>

Note. HW = homework.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
had the support of parents in doing homework were more likely to complete their homework.

The fourth set of predictors included school environment characteristics, among which students’ perceived school violence (β = −.13, t[180] = −2.13, p = .03), and the school homework support variables understanding course materials (β = .13, t[180] = 2.03, p = .04) and participation in school homework program (β = .14, t[180] = 2.18, p = .03) emerged as important predictors of homework completion. These school environment factors accounted for an additional 4% of the variance in the outcome variable (Model 4). Students who felt safe being in their school and its vicinities were more likely to complete their homework assignments than were their peers who felt unsafe and avoided certain areas of the school. Further, those who had received adequate instruction to understand their course materials and attended school homework help sessions were more likely to complete their assignments than their peers who did not have such supports (F[1, 180] = 9.82, p < .001).

Thus, the final model (Model 4) predicting homework completion included 10 predictors (gender, region of origin, behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, homework learning style, parental homework support through conversation about assignments, family conflict due to student behavior, perceived school violence, understanding course materials, and participation in school homework help program), collectively explaining about 34% of the variance in the outcome variable.

**Gendered patterns.** Given regression results indicating that student gender is a significant predictor of homework completion, along with prior research suggesting that effects of factors shaping students’ homework completion rates can vary as a function of gender (Bang et al., 2009; Xu, 2006), an investigation of gendered patterns was warranted. Further analyses were conducted to examine whether the effects of significant predictors in the final regression (Model 4) on homework completion was moderated by gender. Interaction terms were calculated using centered predictor variables. In centering, the sample mean was subtracted from each observed value; this transformation minimizes multicollinearity in moderated multiple regressions and increases the precision of estimates by reducing standard errors (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The centered variables were each multiplied by gender (e.g., Gender*Family Conflict, Gender*Perceived School Violence); each of the interaction terms was tested separately. Hierarchical regression models were specified, in which homework completion was regressed on two blocks of predictor variables. The first block included the variables that were found to be significant predictors of homework completion in Model 4; the second block included an interaction term.

Results indicated that the interaction Gender*Perceived School Violence (β = .15, t[179] = 2.37, p = .04) was significant in predicting homework completion (Table 3), accounting for an additional 3% of variance in the outcome variable above and beyond the predictors in Model 4.

### TABLE 2. Standardized β Coefficients for Hierarchical Regression Model Predicting Homework (HW) Completion Based on Demographics and Individual Student, Home Environment, and School Environment Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Block/Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Block 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region of origin</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral engagement</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td>.23***</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive engagement</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HW learning style</td>
<td>.12†</td>
<td>.13†</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HW environment</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family conflict</td>
<td>−.14*</td>
<td>−.14*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental HW support</td>
<td>.12†</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived school</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>violence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding course</td>
<td>.12*</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>materials</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>School HW help</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* † p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
TABLE 3. Standardized $\beta$ Coefficients for Hierarchical Regression Model Examining the Effect of Perceived School Violence on Homework (HW) Completion Moderated by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Block/Variables</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
<th>Model 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Block 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region of origin</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral engagement</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.20**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive engagement</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.17**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HW learning style preference</td>
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<td>.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HW environment preference</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family conflict</td>
<td>−.14*</td>
<td>−.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental HW support</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.12*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived school violence</td>
<td>−.13*</td>
<td>−.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding course materials</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School HW help program</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived School Violence × Gender</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Indeed, a graph of the interaction (Figure 1) revealed that (a) in general girls were more likely than boys to complete homework and (b) among boys, those who perceived their school to be relatively safe were more likely to complete their homework than their peers who felt relatively unsafe in school. However, the pattern among girls was reversed. Girls who perceived their school to be relatively unsafe were more likely to complete their homework than their peers who felt relatively safer in school. No other significant interactions were identified.

Discussion

The present study provided insight into several individual, family, and school environment factors that contribute to newcomer immigrant students' homework completion. Individual student characteristics were the most important factors associated with homework completion. Consistent with existing research (Goslin, 2003; National Research Council, 2004), students who carried out behaviors conducive to academic success (e.g., showing up for class on time, being attentive) and were engrossed in the content of lessons and class activities were more likely to complete homework than their peers who were less engaged in school. Also, students who indicated greater awareness of their learning styles (e.g., auditory, tactile) and preferences for an environment in which to do homework (e.g., in a structured setting, with adults around) were more likely to complete their assignments than their peers who seemed less aware of the types of tasks and environments that they prefer in regards to homework.

Although individual characteristics such as engagement and learning style were the most crucial factors, certain indicators of qualities of family and school environments also contributed to the consistency with which students completed their assignments. Youth from families characterized by relatively fewer conflicts and greater attention focused on schooling had higher homework completion rates than youth whose families experienced more tension and placed less emphasis on education. Additionally, students who perceived their place of learning (i.e., school) to be unsafe and did not use homework help sessions or other learning opportunities to understand their course materials were less successful in completing homework than those who perceived their school to be safe and sought homework support that was available in their school.

Also consistent with prior research, girls were more likely to complete homework than boys (Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hillard, 2004; Xu, 2006). Further underscoring the importance of individual student characteristics associated with homework completion, the perceived level of violence in the school appeared to have different effects on boys' and girls' capacity to do homework. Although boys who reported higher levels of violence in school seemed to have greater difficulty completing homework consistently, girls who perceived similarly high levels of school violence seemed to redouble their attention on homework.

Implications

Student engagement. Given the importance of behavioral and cognitive engagement in homework completion, teachers' efforts to facilitate homework experiences should involve fostering these characteristics in students through classroom instructional activities that enable students to bring such
dispositions to the task of homework. Research shows that students are likely to be engaged in class work that is academically challenging, and studies on classrooms with successful outcomes for linguistic and ethnic minority youth have identified specific elements that scaffold such engagement (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995). A key element is the use of home culture and language, enabling students to build on prior knowledge and achieve comprehension by drawing from familiar cultural and linguistic resources (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992). This practice may not only help students to feel empowered by their capacity to grasp new material, but also enhance the value that they place on academic content (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). Another important element is collaboration and community building among students through joint activities, projects, and discussions in which students coconstruct knowledge. Such interactions support learning, school-based relationships, and students’ sense of belonging, all of which can further promote engagement.

This study suggested that students who fulfill tasks necessary for academic success, such as paying attention in class and following school rules, recognizing homework as something that will help them perform in school (Bang et al., 2009; Trautwein, 2007). Class-based academic engagement and homework completion are no doubt related, yet students perceive different moods, levels of attention, and motivation when they are doing in-class work versus homework. These inner experiences likely contribute to different levels of success in producing academic work. Such a distinction between classroom engagement and homework completion is essential particularly for newcomer immigrant students, who not only struggle with limited English proficiency, but also confront structural impediments that are built into the ecological systems.

In class, newcomer students learn alongside peers from whom they can receive help, translations, or demonstrations of the given tasks. They also have access to teachers who can provide additional explanation of the tasks or scaffolding of the materials so that simpler steps can be taken toward completing a task. Therefore, teachers need to first involve students in meaningful activities during class and help them experience mastery, after which they could assign homework that would enable students to experience a similar level of mastery and satisfaction they had enjoyed in the classroom.

**Individual learning styles and homework environments.** In addition, the positive relationship between students’ homework completion and their consciousness of their own learning styles and preferences for certain studying environments suggests that helping students identify the manner and the settings in which they learn best could lead to improved homework completion and achievement in school. Homework completion was higher among students who preferred a quiet, structured place conducive to studying; this relationship underscores the importance of providing high-quality homework help programs for newcomer immigrant students. Furthermore, because this study showed a positive relationship between attending school homework help program and homework completion rates, school staff can utilize opportunities provided through these programs to guide students on planning their assignments, allocating time, and managing study environments. Teachers and tutors staffing the homework help programs may demonstrate specific strategies, such as using assignment agendas to plan an individual’s time (e.g., dedicating a certain amount of time each day for a long-term project) or regulating emotions (e.g., self-talk) when interruptions or noise distract students’ attention from homework.

**School homework support and after-school programs.** Research indicates improvement in academic performance among immigrant youth who obtain homework help through participation in formal homework help programs or other after-school activities (e.g., Cosden, Morrison, Gutierrez, & Brown, 2004; Dotterer et al., 2007; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003). The present study results corroborate existing evidence and highlight the importance of homework help in after-school programs. Important reasons for students’ inability to complete their homework included their limited understanding of course materials and difficulty with the language involved in the assignment or the instructions, both of which suggest that students had not yet received sufficient instruction to do the work independently. Additionally, students’ attending homework help sessions at the school was an important factor contributing to their homework completion rates. These findings emphasize not only the importance of homework for immigrant youth to provide them with additional opportunities to learn and practice skills, but also the need for teachers to design assignments that their immigrant students can comprehend and complete. Teachers need to ensure that students are equipped with adequate understanding and skills to perform tasks prior to assigning tasks to be completed outside of class. To do so, teachers may have students start their homework during the class session, discuss vocabulary in the assignment that may pose difficulties, or have students explain to each other the instructions and the steps to take in completing a given task.

The study also suggests the need for administrators to consider investing resources to strengthen school-based homework help programs. By compensating teachers to provide tutoring and supervision of students during homework help sessions, school administration can help teachers gain insight into their immigrant students’ learning styles, preferences for certain kinds of assignments, and areas of individual students’ strengths and weaknesses. Over time, they may also observe differences in the types of difficulties that certain students experience in completing their homework. Such observations can help teachers to design assignments that target specific learning needs and are engaging for their students.
School environment and perceived level of violence. Students’ perception of school violence was another important factor determining their homework completion. If students feel compelled to take certain actions in order to guard themselves from potential threats to their safety, (e.g., staying away from certain places in the school), they are unlikely to become involved in activities that could enhance their engagement and performance in school, such as homework help programs or extracurricular activities. Moreover, students’ efforts to learn and complete assignments will likely diminish if they need to focus on staying safe (Gronna & Chin-Chance, 1999; Prothrow-Stith & Quaday, 1995).

Interestingly, the negative effect on homework completion associated with feeling unsafe at school differed for boys and girls, with boys being considerably more adversely affected by perceptions of violence. It could be that boys experiencing threats to their safety at school tend to respond by disengaging from classes and possibly seeking security by turning to activities and peer groups that interfere with schoolwork. In the meantime, girls experiencing threats to their safety at school may tend to seek security by redoubling their efforts on assignments, perhaps as a way to avoid encounters with unsafe incidents.

In addition to the academic support available in after-school homework help programs, such settings can offer safe environments in which immigrant youth can focus on schoolwork and complete their assignments. By designating the time and place to do homework, these programs can not only help students use their after-school hours more efficiently, but also provide a secure place to do homework. The finding that attendance at school homework help programs significantly contributed to greater homework completion while school violence was significant in reducing homework completion indicates that availability of after-school settings where academic support is provided is essential for newcomer immigrant youth. This claim is particularly pertinent for boys who feel threatened by potential encounters with unsafe incidents around school, as well as for those whose ability to complete homework is compromised by conflictual or unsettled home environment.

Home environment and parent involvement. The study results also indicated that immigrant parents’ involvement in their children’s education promotes academic performance. Although immigrant parents may not have the English proficiency or knowledge of U.S. school systems to provide direct help with assignments, they can support their children’s homework efforts by engaging them in conversations about the assignment, thereby showing their emotional support and encouragement to help children stay motivated in school. Students’ school engagement may also reduce family conflict levels, which in turn can make the home environment more conducive to studying.

To facilitate immigrant parents’ involvement in their children’s schooling, teachers and school staff could dedicate efforts to creating inclusive, welcoming environments for immigrant students and their families, for example, by engaging the cultural and linguistic resources of students in classroom instructional activities and homework. Assignments that engage familiar cultural referents and resources in the students’ families and communities can not only help parents stay informed about their children’s schoolwork, but also allow youth to experience empowerment and greater learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al., 1992).

Limitations and Future Research

The survey data analyzed in this study indicated specific factors that shape newcomer immigrant students’ homework experiences. Subsequent studies should incorporate individual student interviews to gather more detailed information about the processes of newcomer immigrant students’ homework completion and the ways in which they cope with specific homework impediments. Data collected through in-depth interviews can offer insight into patterns or sets of homework facilitators and impediments associated with, for example, newcomer students with interrupted formal schooling or students from certain language backgrounds. Individual interviews can also enable teachers and school staff to identify gender-specific experiences and unsafe encounters that students may come across throughout the course of their day. Identifying such patterns can inform instructional practices of teachers and schools serving newcomer students.

This study was conducted with ninth- and 10th-grade newcomer immigrant adolescents in one International High School designed specifically to address the educational needs of ELLs; thus, the findings of the present study are not generalized beyond the study participants. Future studies should be expanded to include immigrant youth in upper grades as well as newcomer students in other schools to enhance the generalizability of findings and to examine changes in immigrant youths’ homework experiences longitudinally. These longitudinal studies should also employ statistical methods such as multilevel modeling to deal with hierarchically nested structure of data (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). In the present study, as in many studies conducted in school settings, the individual student characteristics are confounded with characteristics of classrooms or schools, as students are not randomly assigned to groups. Future researchers using multilevel modeling can take into consideration the levels of variables (student, classroom, or school) as well as their interactions. This approach would enable decomposition of relationships between variables into separate within- and between-class components, thereby resolving the confounding effects and generating models that more accurately represent the data (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992; Singer & Willet, 2003).

Conclusion

Immigrant families and ELLs are becoming a majority in many communities in the United States (U.S. Census
Bureau, 2003), and educators have the important role of providing quality education for this rapidly growing segment of the population. To empower teachers in this work, schools of education and school districts need to provide high quality, continued training to practitioners (Suárez-Orozco, Gaytán, & Kim, 2010), including courses on language acquisition, homework design, assessment of learning versus language proficiency, classroom arrangements, and cultural norms regarding education and home–school relationships. Ensuring that homework assignments offer meaningful learning experiences and facilitating newcomer immigrant youths’ homework completion is a first step toward academic achievement among these students. Success in school not only improves the lives of these immigrant youth and their families, but also helps to enhance the future economic and social welfare of the country.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks go to Carola Suárez-Orozco, who guided the author through every stage of the research, and to the students and staff at the International High School at Prospect Heights for their time and participation in the project.

NOTES

1. Permission to use the school name was granted by the principal of the school.
2. Indicators of academic English language proficiency, student age, and time in the United States were not included in the analyses. Given the admission criteria of the school where the study was conducted, little variation existed in these variables.

REFERENCES


University of Nevada Las Vegas and School of Education, Tel-Aviv University.


AUTHOR NOTE

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