Immigrant Students’ Homework: Ecological Perspective on Facilitators and Impediments to Task Completion

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A significant body of research has addressed factors associated with homework completion among mainstream English-speaking students, yet there is little such research focusing on immigrant adolescents. This study uses data from the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study to examine individual and ecological context characteristics associated with homework completion among newcomer immigrant students from Central America, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Mexico, and China. Regression analyses showed that strong academic skills, classroom engagement, and school violence were significant predictors of homework completion. Additionally, several indirect effects were found. Students’ classroom engagement mediated the effects of parental employment and family composition on their homework completion. Classroom engagement and academic skills also mediated the effect of gender on homework completion. Implications for practice and policy are discussed.

Introduction

Recent educational reform initiatives have focused attention on raising students’ academic achievement. Schools are held accountable for ensuring that all children make adequate progress toward achieving standards aligned with the general curriculum. In this climate, homework has emerged as a potential vehicle to improve academic achievement. It can provide students with sup-
Homework offers supplemental learning opportunities and encourages students to practice skills taught in class. Research on homework conducted during the past two decades has consistently demonstrated a positive influence of homework on achievement as measured by tests as well as class grades (Cooper et al. 2006).

Among students who may benefit from the greater learning opportunities offered by homework is the increasing population of immigrant adolescents. Twenty-two percent of children in the United States today have at least one foreign-born parent; these students comprise the fastest growing segment of the school-aged population (Hernández et al. 2007). As many immigrant youth are learning English and complex academic subjects simultaneously, they often lag behind their native-born English-speaking peers in academic achievement. One way to bridge this achievement gap may be through the use of homework.

**Importance of Homework for Immigrant Youth**

Immigrant students striving to improve their grasp on English while seeking to master complex academic content stand to gain substantially from the learning opportunities provided through homework. Failure to complete homework, however, may create negative biases in teachers toward their immigrant students because the submission of completed homework is often an important determinant of grades (Bang et al. 2009). Previous research with teachers serving newcomer immigrant students revealed that they often emphasize compliance and homework completion as defining markers of “good students.” In the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation (LISA) study, from which the current study is derived, teachers typically defined “good students” as those who completed their homework and listed such other traits as

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• Attentive in class. Does homework. Asks questions when they need help. Is polite.
• One who follows rules, is punctual, does homework.
• My ideal student is just someone who comes to class, is attentive, works hard, tries to do the work, comes prepared with their homework every day.
• Do you have your pencil and paper, your books, and dictionary? Did you do your homework? (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008; emphasis added)

Although teachers’ evaluations are subjective, grades determined by teachers are closely linked to students’ overall achievement levels (Wendel and Anderson 1994), and whether or not students do homework is often a determinant of grades. Given the links between homework, grades, and achievement, it is important to understand the facilitators and impediments to homework completion in order to support immigrant students’ academic endeavors and help teachers adjust expectations.

Challenges to Homework Completion among Immigrant Youth

There are a number of reasons for which newcomer immigrants students may be at greater risk for failing to turn in their homework assignments when compared to their mainstream peers. Immigrant students are often unfamiliar with the types of homework assignments in the new schooling context, as well as the expectations of teachers in the United States (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). Furthermore, their academic preparation and English proficiency, especially in the initial years after arrival, are often not up to the task (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). Students with poor academic preparation or interrupted schooling may not have sufficient academic skills to independently complete homework (August and Hakuta 1997; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). Their efforts to do homework may also be impeded by challenges associated with poverty: lack of quiet study environments; additional responsibilities such as child care, chores, or paid jobs; and limited access to resources such as after-school programs or role models (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2010). Moreover, immigrant parents are often unable to provide direct assistance with homework because of limited English proficiency, limited formal education, restricted knowledge of the U.S. educational system, or incompatible work schedules (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). Thus, numerous factors challenge immigrant students’ ability to complete homework (Bang et al. 2009).¹

Each homework assignment that is out of reach for immigrant students arguably 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; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008).
We are guided by developmental and ecological perspectives (Bronfenbrenner 1979) that recognize that students’ learning and developmental outcomes are linked to diverse interacting characteristics in their family and school ecologies (Benner et al. 2008; Chung and Steinberg 2006). The ecological systems and the processes within each system are interrelated. In some cases, the individuals or characteristics found within one ecological system may shape those found in another system (O’Connor and McCartney 2007). In others, the interplay of ecological systems may reveal that the manifestation of a trait or behavior can vary depending on conditions. For example, homework completion rates may differ because of diverse effects of multiple elements in a given system. Alternatively, these completion rates may result from different manifestations of an individual characteristic in various ecological systems.

Theories of self-regulated learning (Boekaerts and Corno 2005) and expectancy-value models of academic tasks (Eccles and Wigfield 2002) bear mention, although they were not developed with the immigrant population in mind (Arnett 2008; Henrich et al. 2009). These theories were reviewed to inform our application of the ecological systems model. Since homework allows students considerable freedom in the time, place, resources, and social contexts in which to complete their assignments, various elements can either help or hinder the completion of these tasks. Studies on learning styles (e.g., visual, experiential) and preferences (e.g., noise level, lighting) have demonstrated that in-school and out-of-school learning styles can be empirically distinguished (Milgram and Hong 1996). Students’ academic behaviors (as well as the degree to which students regulate their emotions, thoughts, or actions) depend on diverse characteristics of the environment in which they learn (Hong and Milgram 2000; Marino 1993; Minotti 2005). We can extrapolate from this literature that immigrant students may have difficulty completing homework if, as is often the case, their living quarters are crowded and if they are responsible for tending to younger siblings or helping in a family business, limiting the contexts in which they can concentrate on their homework (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008).

Additionally, immigrant youth who have a history of low academic performance or interrupted formal schooling may experience greater rewards by investing their after-school time and energy on nonacademic tasks, such as a paid job, which can bring them not only financial compensation but also satisfaction and self-esteem (Eccles and Wigfield 2002). Youth who have had limited opportunities to develop academic skills through formal schooling are also likely to be underequipped with behaviors that foster success in schoolwork, such as prioritizing, managing time, or goal setting. These students may
fall short in implementing effective strategies to complete homework assignments (Corno 2004; DiPerna and Elliott 2002).

Some immigrant students may feel insecure about their understanding of a subject matter or language, and they may have no one at home to turn to for help, as is often the case with immigrant youth whose parents have limited English language skills and educational backgrounds of their own (McCaslin and Murdock 1991). These students may therefore be less self-efficacious as they approach independent homework tasks (Bandura 1997; Zimmermann and Kitsantas 2005). While they may have tackled an academic task within the supportive context of the classroom environment with their teacher and peers within easy reach (Vygotsky 1978), they may avoid independently completing independent homework for fear of making mistakes or throw their hands up in resignation to a daunting task (Kralovec and Buell 2001).

These theories underscore the importance of the context in which students do homework; homework environments can have considerable effects on whether students complete the given tasks. Recognizing the importance of contexts, we conducted secondary analyses on a subset of data of the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation study, primarily by applying the ecological systems model. The LISA study was designed to examine immigrant students’ overall academic experiences, which included, but was not focused on, homework. Nevertheless, given the importance of homework in students’ achievement, we used the LISA data to examine the effects of various individual and environmental features that may contribute to immigrant students’ homework completion. Specifically, we investigated how individual, home, and school characteristics affect immigrant students’ homework completion.

**Literature**

Previous studies demonstrated that students who do their homework generally attain higher class grades and achievement test scores than their peers who do not (Cooper and Valentine 2001). While there is ample evidence suggesting positive effects of homework on school performance (Cooper and Valentine 2001), the factors that affect students’ homework completion are varied and less clear (Trautwein and Köller 2003). There are interactive processes involving teachers’ designing and assigning homework (Korkmaz 2007), students’ willingness and ability to dedicate effort and develop their academic skills (Trautwein 2007), as well as the resources available at home and school (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2001). This study is an attempt to understand some of the factors that influence homework completion among a group of students who face particular educational challenges—a diverse group of newcomer immigrant adolescents.
Factors Associated with Immigrant Youths’ Homework Completion

*English Language 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 and Hakuta 1997). Furthermore, not having developed strong literacy skills in one’s native language considerably decreases the chances of acquiring academic language skills in a second language (Genesee et al. 2006).

During secondary school, the curricula content becomes increasingly complex, and resources available in U.S. schools for adolescent English-language learners (ELLs) are more limited in comparison to those available for younger ELLs (Ruiz-de-Vélasco 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 (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008).

*Gender*

Research on gender differences in doing homework has revealed that in comparison to boys, girls more frequently report using strategies such as managing their work space, allocating their time, and monitoring their emotions while doing homework (Xu 2006). Girls also report spending more time on homework, and they are less likely than boys to find homework boring or to come to class without completed assignments (Rogers and Hallam 2006). Furthermore, studies examining the relationship 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 and 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). A study on immigrant boys’ experiences in U.S. schools (Suárez-Orozco and Qin-Hillard 2004) found that teachers saw immigrant girls to be more successful academically and socially than boys. Girls were more likely exert higher levels of engagement in class and have better relationships with peers and adults in schools.
Classroom Engagement

The degree to which students participate and exert effort in academic tasks, such as attending class, paying attention to classwork, and participating in discussions, has been demonstrated to be linked to grades (Fredricks et al. 2004; Greenwood et al. 2002; National Research Council 2004). In the absence of academic skills, at least in the initial years after arrival, showing up and exhibiting good behavior may be a primary criterion for grade evaluation. Classroom engagement has also been associated with homework completion among newcomer immigrant students (Bang et al. 2009; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). While class-based academic engagement and homework completion are no doubt related, academic engagement can and should be considered a separate dimension of what occurs in and outside the classroom. For example, research conducted with early adolescents using experience sampling methods (Leone and Richards 2000) has documented that students perceive different moods, levels of attention, and motivation when they are doing in-class work versus homework. These inner experiences are likely to contribute to different qualities of academic work produced, indicating that classwork and homework should be considered separately. This 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 context systems.

In class, newcomer students are learning 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. Thus, classroom engagement and completion of in-class assignments demand a different kind of disposition (e.g., initiative, acknowledging one’s limitations, and willingness to ask for assistance) and level of independence in comparison to completing assignments at home.

Home Environment

Numerous studies have shown associations between family demographic characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status, maternal education, parental employment, family structure) and children’s achievement (e.g., Ferriss 2006; Sirin 2005). It is well established that socioeconomic status is one of the most important demographic characteristics related to children’s development. Educated parents who are active in the workforce are better able to provide the resources and support needed for their children. Additionally, children growing up in homes with two adult figures tend to have better developmental and
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academic outcomes than their peers living in single-adult households (Ferriss 2006; Thomson et al. 1994). They are likely to have greater resources, as two adults can more easily invest sufficient attention, time, and means for children’s well being than a single parent (Gibson-Davis 2008).

In addition to impediments to homework completion that are similar to those experienced by native-born youth from low-income families, many immigrant adolescents contend with challenges of migration that can lead to familial conflicts (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001). Immigration is a stressful event that exerts particular pressures on the family system (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). Immigrant children must contend with the acculturative challenges of navigating two worlds (Berry et al. 2006). They are often asked to take on responsibilities beyond their years, including sibling care, translation, and advocacy (Faulstich-Orellana 2001), which can have positive consequences, but also negative ones, such as undermining parental authority (Suárez-Orozco and Qin-Hillard 2004).

Thus, immigrant youth may be confronted with highly conflictual family environments, and their ability to concentrate on completing homework could be compromised because of lack of a quiet home environment; limited mental energy to devote to schoolwork; and negative responses to family conflict, including depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, particularly among girls, and aggression or delinquent behaviors, notably for boys (Davies and Lindsay 2004; Formoso et al. 2000).

School Environments

Immigrant families from working-class backgrounds often experience hardship upon migrating to the United States and, with limited economic resources, they often settle in areas that are affected by poverty, unemployment, and less than ideal schools (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). Children attending schools with high levels of poverty have access to fewer resources such as high-quality teachers. Additionally, such schools are often highly segregated, and ELLs may be isolated in bilingual or English as a second language classes. In these contexts, language exposure for immigrant youth and opportunities to interact with members of the dominant culture are limited (Carhill et al. 2008). Moreover, problems such as lack of discipline, violence, and crime that often afflict high-poverty school environs can threaten levels of safety within schools (Gronna and Chin-Chance 1999; Prothrow-Stith and Quaday 1995).

Immigrant youth attending such school environments are unlikely to perceive these contexts as welcoming places where they can engage in acquiring the skills needed to succeed in the United States. In an unfamiliar country and a new school system, their already threatened sense of security will likely
be further diminished as they are forced to focus their energies on protecting themselves from violent incidents rather than on learning (Gronna and Chin-Chance 1999; Prothrow-Stith and Quaday 1995). These students’ experiences in school and their perceptions of the school environment will likely impact their ability to develop the academic and language skills needed to complete homework and achieve in school.

Research Objectives

The primary research objective addressed in this study was to identify what individual (gender, classroom engagement, academic skills, English proficiency) and ecological context features (School Violence, Family Conflict) contributed to immigrant students’ homework completion. Subsequently, we examined whether certain individual or ecological context characteristics mediated the effects of demographic characteristics (Mother’s Education, Parental Employment, Family Composition) on the outcome variable of Homework Completion. This study extends the literature on immigrant youth by applying an ecological systems model to identify various factors and processes through which family and school environments influence immigrant students’ homework completion.

Method

Procedures

This study utilized a subset of quantitative data from the final year (2002) of the five-year LISA study. The LISA study used interdisciplinary and comparative approaches and triangulated data in order to document patterns of adaptation among recently arrived immigrant youth from Central America, China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico.

Recruitment.—Students in the study were recruited from seven school districts in Boston and San Francisco with high densities of immigrants, representing typical contexts of reception for newcomer students from each of the groups of origin (U.S. Census Bureau 2003).2 Participating schools provided access to students, teachers, staff, and school records. With the help of school personnel, we identified youth who met the inclusion criteria: newcomer immigrants who had spent at least two-thirds of their lives in their country of origin, spoke a native language other than English, and whose parents were both from the same country of origin.

Bilingual and bicultural research assistants (RAs) described the project to
potential participants and requested their involvement. The students took home permission slips for parental signature; parents were sent a letter, in their language of origin, requesting their informed consent. The students and parents were told that this was a five-year project investigating the experience of immigration and were assured that their confidentiality would be maintained.

Participants.—A diverse sample ($N = 407$) of newcomer immigrant students was recruited. Participants were between the ages of 9 and 14 years during the first year of the study, with a mean recruitment age of 11.8 years. The students had spent an average of 1.93 years in the United States at the beginning of the study; there were no differences by country of origin. By the fifth year of the study (academic year 2001–2), the sample size was 309, representing a low attrition rate of about 5 percent annually. The final year LISA sample included 57 Central American, 72 Chinese, 60 Dominican, 50 Haitian, and 70 Mexican youth. A comparison of the original sample and the sample used for the present study indicated no significant differences by country of origin ($\chi^2 (4) = 6.34, p = .18$), but there were significant differences by gender, with more girls being represented in the final sample than boys ($\chi^2 (1) = 7.10, p = .008$; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008).

On average, students’ mothers or maternal figures received 9.2 years of schooling, with a range from 0 to 21 years of formal education. One-third of the mothers had completed high school. They were less likely to be employed outside the home than fathers. In the fifth year of this study, 64 percent of the fathers were employed. Students lived in a wide variety of family constellations, ranging from single-parent households to shared spaces with several families and boarders in a single home. Participants’ households ranged in size from 2 to 17 people.

Instrument development.—LISA involved students from distinct language and cultural backgrounds. Cross-cultural research with immigrants challenges traditional social science assumptions around validity and reliability (McLoyd and Steinberg 1998). Questions and prompts that are valid for one group may neither be valid nor culturally and linguistically unbiased for another group. We thus sought to develop an interview that would be relevant and equivalent across groups. Structured interviews were translated into Spanish, Haitian Creole, Mandarin, and Cantonese by bilingual research teams. Scale development was informed by the “insider” RAs, ethnographic fieldwork, grounded emerging findings, and our bicultural protocol development teams, building upon our mixed-methods synergetic foundations (Day et al. 2007).

Interviews.—Each year, students completed structured interviews either during or after school. Bilingual/bicultural RAs conducted all interviews on an individual basis. These student-structured interviews took from one and a half to two hours to administer and involved a variety of question formats (open-ended, fill-in-the-blank, Likert scales, etc.). The scales were orally administered
in the participants’ preferred language so as not to jeopardize the validity of responses given by students with limited language and/or literacy skills.

The variables used in the present study are those from evaluation checklists completed by teachers on each student in addition to the structured interviews conducted with students and parents. Preliminary analyses of the data for the final year sample of students \(N = 309\) showed that 36 students (11.65 percent) had missing data. Comparisons were made between the fifth-year sample of 309 and the sample of 273 students (88.35 percent) for whom all data were available; there were no significant differences on any of the independent variables used in the regression analyses of the present study. Thus, the final sample size was 273. Since LISA was not designed to include a representative sample of immigrant youth in the United States nor in the states of Massachusetts and California, where the study was conducted, no claims are made about the generalizability of its findings to the larger immigrant youth population.

Measures

**Teacher-student checklist.**—Two teachers of each participant were asked each year to complete a one-page checklist developed for the study. A total of 57 teachers completed the checklists, which asked them to report on their students’ academic skills, behavior during class, and consistency with which students turned in homework. Based on their evaluation of consistency, the variable Homework Completion was created. Responses were coded on a five-point scale ranging from “never” to “always.” As a robustness check, we examined the correlation between teachers’ reports of students’ homework completion and students’ self-reports of homework completion, which were collected through structured interviews with individual students. The correlation between teachers’ reports and students’ self-reports was \(r = .48, p < .001\), indicating a fairly substantial degree of agreement between teachers and students.4

**Academic skills.**—The checklist also asked teachers to report on their students’ academic skills. The Academic Skills measure was constructed from a four-item scale designed to assess students’ understanding of course materials, reading, writing, and oral skills in English. Responses were coded on a five-point scale ranging from “very poor” to “very good” (Cronbach’s alpha = .90). A strong positive correlation was observed between this variable and the overall reading and math scores from the Woodcock Johnson Test of Achievement (Pearson \(r = .50, p < .001\)), indicating that teachers were fairly accurate in their assessment of students’ academic skills.

**English proficiency.**—The Bilingual Verbal Ability Tests (BVAT; Muñoz-Sandoval et al. 1998) was used to measure English Language Proficiency (ELP). The BVAT was administered on an individual basis and has been normed on all
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of the languages represented in the study. The median reliability across age groups for the ELP scale is .96.

Classroom engagement.—A four-item scale assessed students’ behaviors of their academic engagement specifically within the classroom context. The question format was adapted from Harter’s “structure alternative format” designed to counteract social desirability effects (Harter 1982, 89). The Classroom Engagement items divided students into two groups (e.g., “Some students just try to get by in school/Other students always try to do their best”). Students were asked to determine whether they were more like the first or the second group and then were asked whether the chosen statement was either “sort of true” or “really true” for them. Classroom Engagement items included statements such as “some students always finish their work, but other students often do not finish it”; “some students pay close attention in class, but other do not.” Scores ranged from one to four with higher scores indicating higher engagement (Cronbach’s alpha = .79).

Perception of school violence.—This 10-item scale assessed the frequency with which students perceived problems of violence and bullying in their school. Such items included “I do not feel safe in my school,” “my school is badly affected by crime and violence in the community,” and “I frequently see students getting into fights.” Responses were coded on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = never to 5 = several times a day (Cronbach’s alpha = .77, ranging from .67 to .79 across ethnic groups).

Family conflict.—A seven-item scale assessed the extent to which various issues (e.g., parents’ long working hours, students’ grades, new family members, growing up in the United States) caused conflicts between the student and family members. Answers were coded on a three-point scale ranging from “not a problem” to “a serious problem” (Cronbach’s alpha = .72).

Demographic data.—The Family Composition variable indicated whether students lived with two parental figures (coded 1) or with a single caregiver (coded 0). Maternal Education indicated whether a student’s mother completed her high school education (coded 1) or not (coded 0). Parental Employment indicated that at least one parent in the family was active in the workforce (coded 1) or not (coded 0). Male students were assigned a value of zero and female students a value of one.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Descriptive statistics for Homework Completion, English Proficiency, and Academic Skills are displayed in table 1. Descriptive statistics for other variables

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in the study are provided in table 2. To examine the relationships between variables indicating students’ academic skills, behaviors, home- and school-environment factors, and demographic variables, a correlation analysis was performed, presented in table 3.

Regression Models

Separate regression analyses were conducted to examine associations between homework completion and family background variables, child characteristics, and school characteristics. All variables were standardized and entered in sets (demographics, child academic behavior and skills, home and school environment) to assess the unique contribution of each. In addition, we assumed that family background variables precede the development of children’s skills and home- or school environment characteristics and that demographic factors could affect children’s school performance in different ways, depending on the skills or behaviors children acquire and the quality of the contexts in which they spend time. Therefore, we focused on the demographic variables that were significantly related to homework completion. Where the effects of these demographic variables on homework completion appeared to be intervened by individual skills, home, or school environment features, we conducted mediation analyses to understand how this process occurred. By using Sobel’s z-tests, we determined whether child Academic Skills, Classroom Engagement, or School Violence significantly mediated the effects of demographic characteristics on homework completion (Baron and Kenny 1986).

Predicting homework completion.—A hierarchical regression model was specified in which Homework Completion was regressed on three blocks of predictor variables identified in the literature as important factors associated with students’ ability to complete homework. The three blocks of predictors were demographics, academic behaviors and skills, and home and school environment characteristics (see table 4).

In the model including solely demographic variables (model 1), Gender (β = .32, t = 5.30, p < .001) and Family Composition (β = .24, t = 2.81, p < .01) were significant predictors of Homework Completion, jointly explaining about 13 percent of the variance. Girls tended to complete homework more consistently than boys, and students from two-adult households were more likely than their peers in single-adult homes to turn in their homework consistently. Interestingly, two variables typically associated with academic outcomes—mother’s completion of secondary education and parental employment status—were not significantly associated with students’ homework completion.

When academic behaviors and skills variables were entered in model 2, Academic Skills (β = .35, t = 5.80, p < .001) and Classroom Engagement
### TABLE 1

**Descriptive Statistics of Students’ Homework Completion, English Proficiency, and Academic Skills (N = 273)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homework Completion*</td>
<td>3.85 (1.24)</td>
<td>5 (always)</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 (almost always)</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 (occasionally)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (seldom)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (never)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Proficiency</td>
<td>74.43 (18.37)</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Skills</td>
<td>11.32 (4.77)</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>17.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>20.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>30.46</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>24.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6.95</td>
</tr>
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</table>

* Teacher report of individual student’s homework completion.

\( \beta = .24, t = 4.13, p < .001 \) emerged as significant predictors of Homework Completion, thus explaining an additional 20 percent of the variance above and beyond the demographic variables. Family Composition was no longer significant after Classroom Engagement and Academic Skills were entered into the model. Finally, when home- and school-context variables were entered in model 3, School Violence \( \beta = -.17, t = -.3.01, p < .01 \) emerged as a significant predictor of Homework Completion, explaining an additional 5 percent of the variance in the outcome variable. The demographic child academic behavior and skill and the home and school environment variables collectively explained about 38 percent of the variance. All \( R^2 \)-square values

### TABLE 2

**Descriptive Statistics of Other Predictor Variables Used in the Study (N = 273)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Engagement</td>
<td>12.29 (2.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Violence</td>
<td>20.40 (5.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Conflict</td>
<td>10.90 (2.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Composition (living with more than one parent figure; %)</td>
<td>68 (NA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Education (high school graduate; %)</td>
<td>34 (NA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Employment (at least one parent employed; %)</td>
<td>66 (NA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (female; %)</td>
<td>57 (NA)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE.**—NA = not applicable.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Homework Completion</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>3. Maternal Education</td>
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<td>.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Parental Employment</td>
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<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.02</td>
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<td>5. Family Composition</td>
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<td>-.08</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.70***</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Classroom Engagement</td>
<td>.68***</td>
<td>.21***</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Academic Skills</td>
<td>.43***</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.26***</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>8. English Proficiency</td>
<td>.24***</td>
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<td>.25***</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.20***</td>
<td>.38***</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. School Violence</td>
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<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>-.33***</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
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<td>10. Family Conflict</td>
<td>-.25***</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.20***</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>.24***</td>
<td>1</td>
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</table>

**Note.**—This analysis included students for whom there was complete data (N = 273). Gender: male = 0, female = 1; mother completed high school = 1, mother did not complete high school = 0; parent employed = 1, parent not employed = 0; single-parent family = 0, two-parent family = 1.

* p < .05.

** p < .01.

*** p < .001.
Immigrant Students’ Homework

TABLE 4

Standardized Beta Coefficients for Hierarchical Regression Models Describing the Relationship of Homework Completion to Demographics, Academic Behaviors, and Environmental Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Block and Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographics:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>Family Composition</td>
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<td>.13+</td>
<td>.10</td>
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<td>Child academic behavior and skill:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom Engagement</td>
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<td>.17**</td>
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<td>Academic Skills</td>
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<td>Home and school environment:</td>
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<td>School Violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
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<td>.20***</td>
<td>.05**</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

+ $p < .10.$
* $p < .05.$
** $p < .01.$
*** $p < .001.$

and changes in these values were significant at the $p < .001$ level). Multicollinearity was not a problem in any of the models examined; tolerance statistics ranged from .82 to .97.

Mediation analysis.—In order to better understand the processes through which homework completion could have been affected by students’ background, and their individual-, home-, or school environment characteristics, mediation analyses were conducted. First, we examined whether the effect of significant demographic family background characteristics (Family Composition) on Homework Completion were indirect through features that are more proximal to the child (Academic Skills, Classroom Engagement, and School Violence). We hypothesized that students who have two adults at home were more likely to have time to focus on schoolwork rather than working a job or helping to manage the household. These students were also more likely to have adult supervision after school, as well as a parent who was gainfully employed (as indicated by the high positive correlation between Family Composition and Parental Employment; $r = .70, p < .001$). We also expected that parents with greater resources would live in neighborhoods with relatively low levels of crime, poverty, and unemployment, and where schools also tend to be safer and equipped with more resources. To test these hypotheses, we conducted a series of OLS regression models using the methods described by
FIG. 1.—Effect of family composition on homework completion completely mediated by classroom engagement.

Baron and Kenny (1986), according to whom four conditions need to be met to establish mediation. First, the independent variable must directly affect the dependent variable (path $c$). Second, the independent variable must directly affect the mediator (path $a$). Third, the mediator must affect the dependent variable (path $b$). Finally, after controlling for the mediator, the relationship between independent and dependent variables must be removed or reduced (path $c'$).

In the mediation analysis, Family Composition was an independent variable; Academic Skills, Classroom Engagement, and School Violence were the mediators; and Homework Completion was the dependent variable. Only Classroom Engagement and School Violence were significant mediators, and all conditions described above were met for OLS regressions involving these two mediators (figs. 1 and 2). Family Composition was a significant predictor of Homework Completion (path $c$, $b = .46$, $p < .01$) and of Classroom Engagement (path $a$, $b = 1.97$, $p < .001$; fig. 1). Classroom Engagement (path $b$, $b = .12$, $p < .001$) was also a significant predictor of Homework Completion. When Family Composition and Classroom Engagement were entered simultaneously as predictors of Homework Completion, the effect of Family Composition on Homework Completion was removed (path $c'$, $b = .04$, $p = .26$), indicating that effect of Family Composition on Homework Completion was completely mediated by Classroom Engagement (Sobel’s $z = 2.87$, $p < .01$). Similarly, Family Composition was a significant predictor of School Violence (path $a$, $b = -1.88$, $p < .05$; fig. 2), and School Violence was a significant predictor of Homework Completion. When Family Composition and School Violence were entered simultaneously as predictors of Homework Completion, the effect of Family Composition on Homework Completion was reduced (path $c'$, $b = .329$, $p = .035$), indicating that effect of Family Composition...
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FIG. 2.—Effect of family composition on homework completion partially mediated by school violence.

on Homework Completion was partially mediated by School Violence (Sobel’s $z = 2.32, p < .01$). In other words, students with two adults at home were more likely to be engaged in class and enrolled in relatively safe schools, both of which were conducive to students’ successful completion of homework.

Additionally, since student Gender was strongly associated with greater Homework Completion, and its effects only modestly reduced when individual skills and home- and school-environment features were taken into account, mediation analyses were performed to understand the mechanism through which Gender affected the outcome variable. The analyses examined whether student gender shaped their homework completion indirectly through other individual or environmental characteristics that were found to be important

FIG. 3.—Effect of gender on homework completion partially mediated by classroom engagement.

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in predicting Homework Completion—that is, Academic Skills, Classroom Engagement, and School Violence. Since girls and boys generally demonstrate different behaviors in class and may respond to their environments in varying ways, examinations of the relationships between student gender and other proximal characteristics were warranted.

Results showed that Gender was a significant predictor of Homework Completion (path $c$, $b = .73$, $p < .001$) and of Classroom Engagement (path $a$, $b = 1.097$, $p = .001$; fig. 3). Classroom Engagement was a significant predictor of Homework Completion (path $b$, $b = .186$, $p < .001$). When Gender and Classroom Engagement were entered simultaneously as predictors of Homework Completion, the effect of Gender on Homework Completion was reduced (path $c'$, $b = .55$, $p < .001$), indicating that effect of Gender on Homework Completion was partially mediated by Classroom Engagement (Sobel’s $z = 3.06$, $p < .001$). Similarly, Gender was a significant predictor of Academic Skills (path $a$, $b = 1.52$, $p < .05$; fig. 4), and Academic Skills was a significant predictor of Homework Completion. When Gender and Academic Skills were entered simultaneously as predictors of Homework Completion, the effect of Gender on Homework Completion was reduced (path $c'$, $b = .57$, $p < .001$), indicating that the effect of Gender on Homework Completion was partially mediated by Academic Skills (Sobel’s $z = 2.41$, $p < .001$). Put another way, girls displayed higher classroom engagement and academic skills than boys and, thus, completed homework more consistently. Yet, the effect of student gender on homework completion was not associated with the level of violence in the school; unsafe schools were not conducive to learning and engagement that facilitated homework completion, regardless of student gender.

FIG. 4.—Effect of gender on homework completion partially mediated by academic skills.
Immigrant Students’ Homework

Discussion

An ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner 1979) of development is useful in framing the interacting family, neighborhood, and school challenges on homework completion by newcomer immigrant students, a rapidly growing student population. In this study, we examined student-level characteristics as well as ecological context features that impeded or enhanced the likelihood that newcomer immigrant students turned in their homework.

Our findings were in keeping with those of other studies conducted with native-born students that have shown positive associations between academic skills and homework completion (Cooper et al. 2006). Newcomer immigrant students with higher levels of academic skills were more likely to turn in their homework consistently. Here it is important to note, however, that causality is not clear—students who had higher levels of skills might have been more likely from the outset to turn in their homework, but it is also possible that students who turned in their homework might have had greater opportunities to develop their academic skills and English proficiency, both of which facilitate homework completion. Indeed, we learned in our analyses that when Academic Skills and English Proficiency were simultaneously examined as predictors of Homework Completion, Academic Skills appeared to replace English Proficiency, suggesting that students who are identified as having greater academic skills, by definition, have greater English proficiency.

Also consistent with finding from other studies, we learned that classroom engagement was a strong indicator of homework completion (Fredricks et al. 2004). Students who reported that they were punctual, attentive, and non-disruptive in class were also more likely to complete homework than their less engaged peers. Those who were likely to complete their work when classroom supports (e.g., teacher, peer, Internet) were available were also more likely to turn in their independent homework than students who did not do their classwork. This finding recognizes the interrelatedness of classroom engagement and homework completion, two dimensions we examined separately in order to assess students’ behaviors in different contexts. It suggests that immigrant students who complete homework consistently are those who adapt their learning strategies according to their home and school contexts, that is, those who have developed competence in using various approaches to complete assigned tasks.

In addition, girls were more compliant and willing than boys to meet teacher expectations in the classroom, dispositions that they also brought to the task of completing homework. This finding corroborates other studies that have found that girls tend to be relatively more attentive, on task, and well behaved in comparison with boys (López 2003; Suárez-Orozco and Qin-Hilliard 2004).
The gendered patterns prove significant despite the diversity of cultures represented.

*Immigrant Students’ Home and School Environments*

The study findings confirm that quality and availability of resources in home and school environments significantly affect immigrant students’ capacity to do homework and engage in behaviors that promote academic achievement (Prothrow-Stith and Quaday 1995; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). We found support for the claim that demographic characteristics have an indirect effect on child achievement through their influence on more proximal features, such as child behaviors and characteristics or home and school environment (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Whether or not students had two adults at home was important for their ability to be engaged in class. In single-adult households, youth most likely did not have adults who structured their afterschool time or provided assistance with schoolwork. Also, as is common in many immigrant families, these youth may have had responsibilities that competed for time and energy needed for schoolwork. Furthermore, two-adult families were more likely to have an employed parent, which translated into greater resources for the children, enabling the students to better focus in class and acquire the knowledge skills needed to complete independent homework.

Youth from single-adult households were also more likely to perceive their school environment as unsafe. The immigrant families in this study were of low socioeconomic class, and they generally settled into impoverished urban neighborhoods, characterized by unemployment, violence, segregation, and structural barriers (Orfield and Lee 2006; Wilson 1997). Such neighborhoods offer far from optimal schools to their residents (Kozol 1991): these schools are typically underresourced, with high teacher turnover, high dropout rates, and frequent incidents of violence (Orfield and Lee 2006; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). Violent school climates are not conducive to learning and are reflective of other school characteristics that can contribute to lower student engagement (Way et al. 2007). Students who feel unsafe in their school vicinities are more likely to be guarded and less willing to take part in school activities that offer opportunities to interact with peers and become engaged in school (Garbarino 2001). The present study also indicated that students’ perceptions of school problems translated into less likelihood that they would turn in homework assignments.
This study offers initial insights into immigrant students’ homework experiences and the factors that may influence their homework completion. The impediments that immigrant students encounter in doing homework are in many ways the same as those faced by all students. Personal characteristics such as tenacity or compliance, school climate and quality, and home challenges serve to enhance or impede homework completion. Immigrant adolescents, however, encounter particular challenges, given their need to master English while concurrently acquiring the skills and credits necessary to complete high school (Ruiz-de-Velasco et al. 2001). Moreover, the pressure to quickly acquire academic English proficiency has become particularly intensified with recent school accountability policies requiring all students to pass high-stakes standardized tests, some of which are notoriously difficult even for native English-speaking students (Menken 2008). The challenge of learning English is even greater for those who experienced interrupted or limited formal schooling in their countries of origin.

Our analyses showed significant links between academic skills and homework completion; they also showed that students’ English proficiency appeared to largely affect teacher assessments of their students’ academic skills. Students’ level of understanding in a course indeed seems critically dependent on their language abilities or, more precisely, their proficiency in English. This finding underscores the importance of providing immigrant youth with opportunities to attain the English proficiency needed to master academic materials. Research has shown that English-language learners need, on average, 7–10 years of consistent exposure and quality instruction to acquire the academic language proficiency required to perform competitively with native English-speaking peers (Hakuta et al. 2000). Thus, homework for this population should be designed and scaffolded so that it becomes an opportunity to develop academic English skills while reinforcing content knowledge. Teachers could investigate immigrant students’ failure to complete homework to identify the language learning needs of the students and avoid, albeit inadvertently, penalizing the students for not having had the opportunity to learn the skills and language required for the homework.

Implications for Practice

Our findings suggest that thoughtful instructional practices can mitigate the negative associations between immigrant students’ capacity to complete homework and their background characteristics, such as parental employment and family composition. The fact that homework completion increases with class-
room engagement and academic skills points to promising intervention points: building students’ English language proficiency (and by extension, academic skills) and creating learning environments that foster classroom engagement (Greenwood et al. 2002; Marks 2000). Using what they know about students’ interests, learning styles, strengths, and needs, teachers could design homework assignments that promote cognitive engagement in the classroom.

To improve immigrant students’ homework experiences and ensure that they are equipped with the necessary skills to complete assignments, teachers can have students start their homework in class, where they can readily access help from teachers and peers. Furthermore, to improve immigrant students’ homework completion and make homework beneficial for them, teachers may reconsider the purposes of homework and the rewards associated with it (Epstein and Van Voorhis 2001). Teachers often consider students’ homework when giving course grades (Bang et al. 2009); thus, some students may view grades as an important reason for doing homework, perhaps to the exclusion of other motivations. Emphasizing the effect that homework has on students’ grades can misrepresent the primary purpose of homework. Since most homework is designed to help students practice their skills, assessments of homework ideally would be formative, intended to shape day-to-day instruction (William 2007).

Implications for Policy

In order for teachers working with immigrant youth to be able to provide the kinds of support that their students need, schools of education and school districts need to provide high-quality, continued training for practitioners (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2009). Such training should include courses on language acquisition; homework design; assessment of learning versus language proficiency; classroom arrangements; and cultural norms regarding education, teacher-student relationships, and teacher-parent relationships. Particular attention should be given to specific homework accommodations, which may include simplifying the language in the assignments, using visual aids, providing choices in assignment tasks, and adjusting the difficulty level and criteria based on individual students’ linguistic or academic abilities. Developing the capacity to implement different teaching strategies for immigrant students will enable practitioners to better serve increasingly diverse groups of students, regardless of their family backgrounds.

Policy makers and administrators can also promote quality education for newcomer students by providing teachers with greater flexibility in designing curriculum and classroom resources that facilitate individualized instruction and tailored homework assignments (Darling-Hammond 1997). School ad-
ministrators may consider allocating time for teachers to collaborate with each other, exchange skills, and share knowledge of individual students to create assignments that are suited to their diverse learning needs.

Furthermore, collaboration between administrators, community leaders, and policy makers to make schools safe can foster students’ ability to engage in academics and complete homework (Gronna and Chin-Chance 1999; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). Efforts to address community violence will further promote positive social relationships and healthy psychological development of youth (Garbarino 2001). Attention should be paid to services that would help students who do not have home academic support to bridge the gap, especially after-school tutoring; community centers with school supports; and amply staffed, well-equipped libraries (Annunziata et al. 2006; Noam et al. 2002).

After-school homework help centers and community organizations can further be a source of community cohesion and supervision that can serve to protect youth from potentially negative elements in their new settings (DeVos 1992; Perkins and Borden 2003). In particular, homework help programs offer safe, structured environments in which immigrant youth can focus on schoolwork and complete their assignments. Principals and community leaders can work together to organize and systematize after-school programs or community education centers where immigrant students can receive assistance with homework, learn to use after school hours efficiently, and be assured of having a quiet, secure place to do homework. The study findings suggest that the availability of such environments is essential for newcomer immigrant youth, as these settings can serve as buffers against potential encounters with unsafe incidents around school and conflictual home environments that disproportionately affect immigrant students.

Support from policy makers and school district administrations may also include organizing community outreach efforts that connect students and parents to local resources such as ESL classes, parenting classes, and bilingual/bicultural leaders. These resources may help families deal with tensions and disagreements, many of which can arise as a result from the adjustments to migration (Roffman et al. 2003). Efforts should be made to encourage immigrant parents’ involvement in their children’s schooling. Although parents’ working schedules and limited knowledge of English or the U.S. educational system may hinder them from taking more active roles in their children’s school lives, involvement can take many forms (Epstein 2008; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2001). Parents can improve children’s homework completion and engagement simply by having conversations about schoolwork and giving encouragement.
Limitations and Future Research

This was an exploratory, secondary analysis drawn from the final year of the LISA study, which was designed to examine the academic adaptation of immigrant students but was not specifically focused as a study of homework. As such, not all elements in various ecological systems that could influence homework completion were included in the study (e.g., students’ learning styles, access to homework help or tutoring, having to work at a job), and we do not claim causal links between factors in immigrant students’ adaptation to the United States and their homework completion. The sample was one of convenience, as random sampling was not possible, given the specific inclusion criteria of the study, the need for signed permission from school personnel and parents, and the required commitment of five years of participation. These conditions limit to some degree our ability to generalize from our sample. Given the results of our descriptive statistics (parental education, parental employment, household size, etc.), however, this sample can be considered representative of recently arrived immigrant students (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008).

Because of normal transitions from middle to high schools as well as the high mobility of immigrant students, our study participants transferred schools frequently over the course of the five years of the study (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2010). By the end of the study, they had dispersed to over 125 schools, limiting our ability to model the multilevel structure of the data given the number of participants. Future studies with a larger sample should apply multilevel modeling to take into consideration each level (student, classroom, and school) as well as their interactions. This approach would enable decomposition of relationships between variables into separate within-class and between-class components, thereby resolving the confounding effects and generating models in order to more precisely represent the data (Bryk and Raudenbush 1992).

Future studies should also consider more comprehensive measures and predictors of homework completion. Multi-item measures of task completion, collected from multiple perspectives (teacher, student, parent), should be used in future research to confirm the findings reported here. In addition, indicators of homework completion should include parental involvement, teachers’ purposes for assigning homework, students’ motivation for doing homework, and strategies students may use to complete homework in a timely fashion. These studies could examine theories of self-regulated learning and expectancy-value models of achievement-related choices to assess the extent to which the frameworks apply to the homework experiences of newcomer immigrant students. Moreover, it will be important to expand future studies to examine the relationships between homework completion and other domains of functioning,
such as psychological adjustment, social-emotional development, and general well being. Research with other newcomer immigrant groups of origin not included in this study is also warranted.

Conclusion

Immigrant families and English language learners are becoming a majority in many communities in the United States (Hernández et al. 2007; Mather 2009; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008), and educators have the important role of providing quality education for this rapidly growing segment of the population. Teachers also have the responsibility of helping their students develop the capacity to adapt to and function in multiple cultures, a skill that is becoming increasingly essential for meaningful participation in a globalized society. Success in school will not only improve the lives of immigrant students and their families but also help enhance the future economic and social welfare of the United States.

Notes

The Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation study (co–principal investigators Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco) was made possible by the generous support of the National Science Foundation, the William T. Grant Foundation, the Ross Institute, and the Spencer Foundation.

1. The word “factor” in this article refers to some component, agent, or instrument. It is not meant to indicate factor analysis. Throughout the article, “factors,” “elements,” “features,” and “characteristics” are used interchangeably.

2. Data on school quality became available from school district data in the last year of the study following the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). These data included the percentage of students who are poor (eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch) and segregation rates (racial and ethnic school composition). While there was fluctuation from year to year in school quality for individual students, ethnographic data revealed that students tended to stay within their districts and transition to schools of comparable quality (See Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008 for detailed description of school contexts).

3. Missing values analysis conducted at the variable level showed that all variables had less than 5 percent missing values (the highest was 4.70 percent for Parental Employment), indicating that the missing data are ignorable (McKnight et al. 2007).

4. Regression analyses discussed in this study were also performed using students’ self-report of homework completion as the outcome measure. The results were similar to those reported in this study with respect to the predictors Classroom Engagement, Academic Skills, and School Violence. The effects associated with student gender, however, were different between the models. While gender was significant in contributing to teachers’ report of homework completion, it was not significantly associated with students’ self-report of homework completion. A detailed report of this set of analyses can be obtained by contacting the first author.
References


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