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Maritsa S. Tatchukova

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**Impact of Familial Immigration on Childhood Academic Achievement and Motivation**

Maritsa S. Tatchukova

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Science

in

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and

Psychology

Thesis Advisor

Karlyn R. Adams-Wiggins, Ph.D.

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**Abstract**

This paper conducted a review of the current literature on the topic of immigrant children and academic success. It particularly focuses on the role of key factors such as family, peers, teachers, self-perceptions, language, and extracurriculars. This paper then discusses the study done in addition to the literature review. The study involved interviewing six college students in the Pacific Northwest. All were a mix of first and second-generation children of immigrants. The study conducted a qualitative analysis of the interview transcript and discusses the results of four of those interviews. The findings suggest that the role of the family and parents is most impactful, the other roles still being important but to a lesser extent. The literature review and the current study suggest that children of immigrants have unique circumstances that demand academic success.

*Keywords:* immigrant children, academic achievement, immigrant families, academic motivation

## **Impact of Familial Immigration on Childhood Academic Achievement and Motivation**

### **Literature Review and Background**

The United States is home to over 44 million immigrants. In 2019, nearly 18 million U.S. children lived with at least one immigrant parent (Batalova et al., 2021). Of those 18 million, 12% of children were first-generation immigrants (foreign-born children) and 88% were second-generation immigrants (US-born children with at least one foreign-born immigrant parent) (Batalova et al., 2021). This number has increased by about 6 million over the last two decades (Batalova et al., 2021). As this number grows, so does the number of future community members, teachers, friends, neighbors, health care professionals, leaders, and voters—roles that immigrant children will come to inherit.

Motti-Stefanidi and Masten (2013) hypothesized that the academic success of immigrant children is an indicator of future success in terms of adaptation and acculturation. They believe that immigrant children who succeed in school would have positive outcomes as adults, such as success in the workforce, low reliance on social welfare, low rates of teen pregnancy, and low rates of criminal behavior. Motti-Stefanidi and Masten's (2013) literature review found that immigrant children faced multiple challenges that native-born children did not. Immigrant children were tasked with both acculturation and enculturation—that is, adapting and assimilating while retaining the parents' culture of origin. Success academically relies in part on acculturation, particularly in terms of learning the language. Sometimes the two cultures come into direct conflict and immigrant children are faced with another unique challenge (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2013).

The education of immigrant children is crucial to where they go and the future direction of this country (Greenman, 2013). Currently, research is being conducted globally about the

academic motivation and achievement of immigrant children. This is a question psychologists everywhere are understanding the importance of expanding upon as the role of immigrants and their children in society becomes clear. First- and second-generation immigrant children typically have higher rates of academic success than their native-born peers; findings from the literature review and the present study indicate that first- and second-generation immigrant children's academic success generally derives from the stressors of their unique circumstances.

### ***The Immigrant Paradox***

Key findings on research done so far have indicated that there are a rich set of factors that are at play in an immigrant child's academic success. Some of the most common ones that have been identified are family background (including parental attitudes, support, and expectations), peer support, teachers, school neighborhood and resources, and individual attitudes and aspirations. One of the lead researchers on the topic, Cynthia Garcia Coll, developed an integrative model with her colleagues that addresses significant issues immigrant families face such as acculturation, discrimination, and racism (Coll et al., 1996). The integrative model includes eight significant factors the researchers hypothesize affect the developmental process of minority children (See Appendix A) (Coll et al., 1996). Coll's model takes into consideration how a child's daily experiences and interactions that might be a result of discriminatory and oppressive environments affect their cognitive, behavioral, and emotional development (Han, 2006).

Han (2006) uses Coll and colleagues' model to develop her own hypothesis that the development of immigrant children is related to family background, parental expectations, and school and neighborhood resources. Han uses the data from the US Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics on Early Childhood Longitudinal Studies to evaluate

data from 16,000 children who were followed from Kindergarten through 12th grade. Han (2006) assessed measures of academic achievement, math, and reading skills, information gathered from parents on parental involvement at home and at school, and then the information gathered from teachers and school administration on parental involvement and classroom characteristics. Han's research led her to conclude her hypotheses were supported, concluding that child and family characteristics were the most important factors on learning outcomes, and school and neighborhood had some influence but not as much (2006).

Throughout my background research, Coll's work regarding the concept of the immigrant paradox has proved impactful in further developing an understanding of immigrant experiences in the United States, particularly within an educational context. The immigrant paradox refers to the idea that new immigrants and immigrant children tend to do better academically compared to US-born individuals or non-immigrants. While research has found a pattern in regards to the Immigrant Paradox, it is important to note that there is still variance in the strength of the concept amongst groups depending on age, ethnicity, developmental stage, and even methodology (Marks et al., 2014).

Tienda and Haskins provide a solid overview of the literature on the topic of immigrant children and their well-being. Their stated goal is to understand what could be done to "improve their educational attainment, health status, social and cognitive development, and long term prospects for economic mobility" (2011, p. 3). They provide a general overview of the recent literature regarding more specific aspects of immigrant youths' lives, including housing, education (with a breakdown of literature findings at each stage of education), physical and mental health, assimilation, and poverty. While their review is broad and includes more subtopics than the current paper focuses on, they provide a solid understanding of how the concern for

immigrant youths goes beyond the K-12 classroom setting. They have shown that there are barriers at every level that deeply affect each other. So while the current paper intends to focus on K-12 experiences in education and academic achievement and motivation of immigrant youth, it is essential to note that this is a multifaceted issue and much deeper than what is touched upon here. For example, Tienda and Haskins note how childhood poverty is linked with negative outcomes as adults like lower levels of academic achievement. So while the general findings of the literature regarding the immigrant paradox indicate that immigrant children tend to outperform their native peers and that strong family ties are a strong advantage for immigrant children, those advantages might be suppressed by things like childhood poverty, or poor physical and mental health (Tienda & Haskins, 2011). The current paper focuses on immigrant families and academic achievement and motivation, but other factors cannot and should not be ignored.

Marks and colleagues discuss how “as immigrant children and adolescents acculturate to the United States ... their developmental outcomes become less optimal” (et al., 2014, p. 59). Marks et al. evaluate research done concerning first- and second-generation immigrant youth and the immigrant paradox. They found that the research has indicated that these youth consistently outperform third-generation and native-born children academically (Marks et al., 2014). Particularly, they noted that when newly arrived children are compared to children who have been living in the US longer, they tend to have more positive outcomes (Marks et al., 2014). Marks et al. also noted how this is in direct contrast to previous conceptualizations of assimilation wherein the assumption were that as immigrants assimilate they become more successful due to losing their original culture and “adopting American ways, values, and



traditions” (2014, p. 59). The implication here is that the less time spent in the US and less submissive they are to American culture, the more successful outcomes are seen.

### ***General Individual and Generational Differences***

Kao and Tienda (1995) conducted a study on the impact of generational immigration status on indicators of academic success and found that native-born children of foreign-born parents are in the best position to achieve academic success. Kao and Tienda evaluated the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 and used three indicators of educational achievement; grades, test scores (math and reading), and college aspirations of 8th graders (1995). The information on grades was used to measure the student's performance in school, test scores in math and reading were used to assess cognitive development, and surveying educational aspirations of 8th graders were used to determine to what extent students were academically oriented (Kao & Tienda, 1995). Lastly, they used the mother's education-related goals for their children and then their children's perceptions of these goals to evaluate whose immigration status had a greater impact on educational performance and goals; the parents or the children. What Kao and Tienda (1995) found was that, overall, immigrant parents had more optimism about their children's academic future and success but because second-generation children had the advantage of being the US-born and English proficiency they fared better.

However, Kao and Tienda (1995) do note that they found no evidence of straight-line assimilation, the assumption that immigrant youth have low academic achievement but that achievement increases with generational status because immigrant children consistently performed at the same level or better than their native peers. It was simply that second-generation children did better than both first-generation and native-born groups (Kao & Tienda, 1995). Thus, Kao et al. conclude that second-generation children are best positioned for

academic success because they have a perfect blend of immigrant parent optimism and English proficiency (1995).

Fuligni and colleagues (1997) conducted a study on the relative impact of family background and attitudes on an immigrant child's academic achievement. Fuligni found that first- and second-generation students typically scored higher than their native-born peers and had a stronger sense of motivation to do well academically. Fuligni et al. assessed 1,100 adolescents in grades 6, 8, and 10 of Filipino, Latino, East Asian, and European backgrounds. They had the adolescents self-report on several measures, then obtained course grades from their official records. The adolescents were asked to report on their perception of their parents' expectations regarding the value of success and educational aspirations for their children. They also asked the adolescents to report on their peers' attitudes and behaviors towards academic achievement. Then they were asked about their academic attitudes, study habits, aspirations, expectations, and value of education in math, English, and overall academic success. Their results showed that first- and second-generation students had higher grades in math and English compared to their peers with native-born parents. They also found that there was a strong correlation between a shared emphasis on education between, peers, students, and parents and their overall academic achievement. What this means is that adolescents whose peers and parents share the same values regarding education typically perform well academically (Fuligni et al., 1997). Additionally, Fuligni et al. found that children of immigrants share their parents' beliefs that education is the most important route to success in the US (1997).

Similarly, Greenman (2013) noted the lack of investigation regarding generational differences in approach to education and investigated whether or not there was a link there. Using longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Greenman

collected data on Asian youth and Mexican youth and compared them to data from third-plus generation white youth. Greenman's analysis is split into two parts - the first being educational attitudes and behaviors, and the second being peer culture. In the first part, Greenman assesses student behaviors by looking at attendance, participation via homework, and how well they get along with their teachers or other students (2013). Attitude is assessed by looking at how connected they feel to their peers and teachers, how happy they are, and how fair they think their teachers are. What Greenman finds is that first- and second-generation children have positive attitudes and behaviors towards educational success. First-generation Mexican and Asian adolescents also put more effort into their schoolwork compared to their native-born white peers (Greenman, 2103). Mexican and Asian first-generation adolescents are also less likely to skip school than their native-born peers of the same race. In the second part, Greenman assessed the role of peer culture in the attitude of immigrant children. Generally what Greenman found was that first-generation youth are less susceptible to negative peer influences than any other generational group. Greenman concluded that immigrant children's attitudes toward education declined over generations and that acculturation plays some role there (2013).

### ***School Peers***

Multiple researchers have continuously concluded that immigrant children's peers also hold some influence on their aspirations and motivations. Fuligni's assessment of Latino, East Asian, Filipino, and European first- and second-generation children also found that children whose peers also emphasized education had higher rates of success as well (Fuligni et al., 1997). There was a correlation between academic success and the presence of a strong emphasis on education amongst peer and family groups. Not only is it important to have academic support at home, but from your peers as well. The researchers noted that immigrant children often invested

time and energy into their academics, often by seeking out extra help or studying more (Fulgini et al., 1997). They concluded that while socioeconomic status is an important factor, the surrounding emphasis and support academically are not to be underestimated.

Greenman also aimed to determine the impact of school peers and their attitudes towards education on immigrant children's attitudes. Greenman found that earlier-generation children were less susceptible to influence from their peers, but later-generation children and native-born children were more likely to match the attitude of their peers (2013). Greenman acknowledges that acculturation plays a role in immigrant families' decline in attitude toward education, but it should not be overemphasized and further research should be conducted using other measures of attitude and gives the example of asking if the belief that success comes from effort or natural ability. Greenman's work sets the foundation for part of what this paper intends to try to understand—that is, the influence of peer attitudes on immigrant children's experiences, particularly in regards to their motivation to succeed.

### ***Parental Influences***

Szalacha and colleagues (2005) researched the relationship between the various spheres in immigrant children's lives (i.e family, school, community) and their academic achievement. They chose to focus on middle school particularly, and their study includes families from Portugal, Dominican Republic, and Cambodia (Szalacha et al., 2005). They used Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1979, 1986) and tied that in with Weisner's eco-cultural framework (Szalacha et al., 2005). Szalacha et al. (2005) interviewed parents, they also collected academic data from teachers and school administrations and also collected information regarding community ethnographies to better understand the environment of these children. What they found was that a majority of the children were on what they called a positive academic pathway

(Szalacha et al., 2005). They found that all parents highly valued their children's education and that these parents often emphasized the importance of participating in ethnic activities, and they were able to find a positive connection between that and the positive academic aspirations of children (Szalacha et al., 2005). Szalacha et al. note that further research was still necessary to better understand how immigrant children learn to navigate the many different worlds they become part of (2005).

Rumbaut (2005) also investigated the various factors that play a role in immigrant children's academic achievement, one being parent-child relationships. Rumbaut analyses data from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study which surveyed 5,262 students in 8th and 9th grade from San Diego and Miami, representing 77 different nationalities. They were surveyed again three years later. Rumbaut notes in their introductions that immigrant parents often stake their hopes for the future on their children's success, their education, and the overwhelming sense of obligation these children have as a result (2005). Rumbaut notes that this can cause difficulties between parents and children as the children are also faced with learning American culture, pressure to not lose their immigrant culture, and the rifts that come from struggling with each, both culturally and linguistically (2005). While Rumbaut concludes that multiple factors affect the academic achievement of immigrant children, they identify the unique parental-child conflicts immigrant parents and children face that affect children's attitudes towards education.

Felter (2008) specifically studied the educational goals of immigrant children and their parents and came to similar conclusions as others in the field. Felter found that immigrant parents hold their children to high standards, likely because they place a high value on education—viewing it as a means to future success. Felter particularly notes that children whose

parents come from collectivist cultures often share the same values their parents hold. The overwhelming pressure and burden children of immigrants have mentioned by Rumbaut, can be further supported by Felters' conclusions that the children are held to high standards because education is highly valued as the means for future success. For families who come from collectivist cultures, the success of the child is the success of the family, hence the overwhelming burden to succeed academically and thus a potential source of conflict.

Rumbaut (2005) acknowledges the complexity of the immigrant child's circumstances in addressing the multiple interacting factors that influence academic achievement and motivation. Particularly, they found that children of immigrants believed in the importance of a good education, and knew their parent's educational aspirations for them were very high. Rumbaut does note a positive relationship between parental aspirations and student engagement and effort but notes that the direction of causality is unclear (Rumbaut, 2005). Motti-Stefanidi and Masten also note the pressure on immigrant children to use education as a means for future success, not only for the children, but for the family (2013).

Jung and Zhang (2016) aimed to further investigate the role of parental involvement in children's aspirations and achievements. They identified three main aspects of parental involvement: parental English proficiency, parental school involvement, and parental control and monitoring of children (Jung & Zhang, 2016). They found that parental English fluency and school involvement both had a strong influence on children's English proficiency and academic success, but also on children's aspirations, academic achievement, and cognitive development (Jung & Zhang, 2016). However, they noted that parental control and monitoring of the children can have strong adverse effects on cognitive development, despite not having much of an effect on academic achievement, English proficiency, or academic aspirations (Jung & Zhang, 2016).

This could also become a point of contention between immigrant parents and their children, as Felter and Rumbaut noted, overbearing pressure from parents could have adverse effects on the children.

Other studies, both abroad and within the US, have found similar patterns in the relationship between familial emphasis on academics and student academic success, and have also found that a point of conflict and difficulty for immigrant children and their parents is the difference in perceptions of success. A study that specifically compared Iranian families in Iran to Iranian families that had immigrated to Canada found that the mothers in each group had different priorities and the children had different definitions of success (Zadeh et al., 2008). The Iranian mothers valued high grades whereas the Iranian-Canadian mothers valued academic learning, particularly the ability to create something new from the information that has been learned. Consequently, the children of Iranian mothers believed that success was defined by high scores but the Iranian-Canadian children believed success was defined by high scores and academic improvement (Zadeh et al., 2008). McGinnity conducted a study on immigrant children in Ireland, which indicated a strong correlation between a child's familial background and their academic success, primarily that children from low-income families typically have lower reading scores (McGinnity et al., 2015). His research also found that immigrant children with mothers who had high expectations also had high scores, and those with low expectations had low scores (McGinnity et al., 2015). This indicates that parental expectations and emphasis on academic achievement is a key factors in children's academic outcomes.

More focus needs to be brought to immigrants' children's academic achievements in combination with their social development. The current research on the topic is far from complete, but a notable gap is a more direct connection to social development. There could

potentially be a connection between an immigrant child's academic success and their ability to socialize in their new country. Previous research has begun to indicate that teacher perceptions of the child's home country and any negative messages could negatively influence their academic success (Adair, 2015). While Adair is speaking with regards to young children, at the ages of 4 or 5, the impact of teachers throughout education experiences should not be underestimated. Negative early schooling experiences can harm perceptions of education, but if those negative discrimination experiences continue throughout adolescents they can become further destructive and counterproductive.

### **Present Study**

**Research Question:** How does familial immigration impact the academic achievement and motivation of first- and second-generation students? Generally, research has indicated that there is a noticeable trend in the academic success of first- and second-generation immigrants compared to their native-born peers. For this project, first-generation immigrant children will be defined as children born abroad who immigrated to the United States with their parents, at least one of whom was also born abroad. Second-generation immigrant children will be used to refer to children born in the United States with at least one parent who was born abroad and immigrated to the US. Native-born children will mean children who were born in the US with both parents also having been born in the US. Additionally, due to the amount of research conducted within the US, this paper will also be pulling from research done abroad to establish a more solid foundation for the work done here.

This thesis intends to better understand the first- and second-generation immigrant child's experience in the American education system, and how best to support them to become successful, by whatever measures they choose to define that. In addition to reviewing current



literature and research on the topic, this paper intends to analyze interviews with current college students in which they will be asked to reflect on their upbringing and academic success. This paper will establish a further connection between the unique experiences of being a child of immigrants and the academic achievement and motivation of first- and second-generation immigrant children.

Based on the research conducted thus far this paper intends to begin to further understand the unique experiences of children of immigrants and particularly within the context of the American education system with the familial backgrounds they have. This paper aims to better understand how their background and environment have pushed them to do well academically as well as affect their ability to feel connected to their community, peers, and teachers. The aim is to draw a connection between familial immigration background, familial and social environments, and academic achievement. Suggestions for further research and implications of such research will be put forth as well.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants and Design***

Six participants were interviewed in a single group interview that lasted approximately 90 minutes. The participant group consisted of six undergraduate college students from the Pacific Northwest. Of the six interviewed, the results reported only address the first focus group (n=4). Of those in the first focus group, three were second-generation immigrants and one was a first-generation immigrant. Three of them identified as female, and one identified as nonbinary. Two of the female participants came from Latin American countries, one was from Mexico and the other was from Guatemala and Mexico. One participant had one US-born parent and one

parent from Russia. One participant's parents had immigrated to the US from Vietnam, and grandparents had immigrated from China to Vietnam.

### ***Measures***

During the interview, participants were asked about a variety of factors that have been previously identified in research to impact academic achievement and motivation. Participants were asked about languages spoken at home and at school, culture at home and at school, parental involvement, teacher support, and sibling relationships. After the interview, the Zoom transcripts were corrected and altered to include pseudonyms instead of real ones. The qualitative analysis consisted of summarizing individual responses as well as group responses (see Appendix B).

### **Results**

Results have been divided into the main topics that participants were asked about. The first of the topics outlined here were ones that came up most often as having a strong impact on participants' academic achievement and motivation. See Appendix B for more.

### ***Role of the Family***

Participants often talked about their relationship with their families, their parent's involvement, and how this impacted their motivation to succeed. The desire to achieve the goals their parents set for them also came up as a factor for motivation. One participant talked about wanting to show their parents that they could succeed and that academic success was attainable. Some participants also talked about wanting to meet the expectations of their siblings and close relatives and to be a good example for them. One participant, Angel, mentioned that sometimes she felt like a second mother to her siblings, and felt the need to show them that education was attainable and set a good example for how they can work hard to build something for themselves.

That's like one of the main things that motivated me to go to [college] because honestly, I was not thinking about going to college after high school, I was just going to go and work and do the regular nine to five job, but like, I caught myself, and I was just like you know what, if I'm also setting another example, like it's okay to fail and have any hopes of the future like, I don't know, I just, I thought about my siblings future and I always felt like a second mother to them so I'm like hey I know it's okay not to get good grades, it's okay not to be [inaudible] into school like I used to be, but as long as you're trying, and as long as you put your heart into something, then it should be good, and for me, that was education so yeah. (Angel).

Multiple participants talked about wanting to achieve stability and security and learning from their parents that academic success was a means to do that.

Just because, like, you know as family, like a child of immigrants, we come over here with having little to no money and so just having money is like this sense of security for many immigrant families, and so I feel like a lot of times they pressure their children to do jobs that are like lawyers or like doctors. Just so they can have that sense of security and safety. (Florrie)

They also talked about how involved their parents were - everyone said their fathers were not very involved or not involved at all. Mothers had varying degrees of involvement, people mentioned their mothers being involved in PTA but then quitting after a while, especially after noticing a lack of attention to student needs, then turning all their focus on their children. One participant mentioned that while she was in school her mother was actively part of PTA, partially to advocate for her but also to advocate for the teachers who were also in need of support. When

her mother realized nothing would change she chose to focus on her kids instead, and by the time her younger brother got old enough, her mother transferred him to a different school completely.

### ***Role of Peer Relationships***

Responses regarding peer relationships had some variety. One person said they felt very alienated and different from their peers in high school (they had also been homeschooled up until high school which factored into their sense of alienation). “I've just found that a lot of being the child of like, an immigrant and being from you know such a vastly different culture to American culture has been very alienating.” They had particularly noticed that they had very different experiences from their peers, noting that things like access to generational wealth was not an issue for most of their peers but deeply affected them and their family.

My mom was basically my sole parent, so you know I learned, like how to be a Russian person from a Russian person, like, I did not learn to be American so like going to school and like just being told that I'm an American person and like not feeling like one was really weird because you know, I could not relate to these people who had no like hardships that were related to being from a different country, they and their parents had generational wealth, their parents had you know good jobs, I couldn't relate to that like these people owned houses, we didn't have a house. My mom came to America and married my dad who blocked her from obtaining any education in this country and like her degree and her schooling was useless here, she has a Ph.D. in chemistry and like was a professor for all of her college career in Russia, but, here you know, none of that's worth anything so just felt really weird to be like so poor disadvantaged when like my mom was not that in her country, but here she was and it's just like, I just couldn't relate

to people growing up because I just did not feel the same at all I didn't have the same childhood experiences. (Alek)

One person said she felt like she had a good community in her clubs in high school. Another person said that she felt like she tried really hard to connect to other peers and was labeled as very social because she tried to fit in and got along well with the other kids, but she just did not fit in. She talked about a Spanish saying that, in English, translated to "I'm not from here nor from there" which was meant for people like children of immigrants, who did not feel like they fully belonged in one place or the other. Another person said that she was also very social in elementary school but when she noticed kids started splitting into groups she did not really fit into any of them. She said that when she got to high school she kind of gave up on making friends and when she stopped trying so hard that was when she started slowly finding her people over the years.

### ***Role of Language***

When asked about language at home and at school, three out of four of the participants talked about their experiences in ESL at some point during their K-12 education. Two of them did the same dual language immersion program (DLIP) that started in elementary school and lasted through high school. The person who was in ESL but not the DLIP said she liked her ESL class for the most part and felt like she had a good space to connect with other children of immigrants.

I feel like it was mostly Hispanics and Asian Americans in my, ESL class, and I feel like because they were also a minority, it made it more fun for me to just get to know them, and feel like this sense of community like oh, you also have parents who like immigrated from somewhere, and so I found that really fun. (Florrie)

The two students who did the DLEP said they had mixed feelings about it because the schools did not have great conditions for the students or teachers, which was why their moms participated in PTA - in order to advocate for the students and teachers. The moms gave up when they realized they were not being heard, and one of the participants her younger brother was pulled out and transferred to another school when it came time for him to attend. The two who did the DLIP primarily spoke Spanish and English, their mothers also spoke Spanish, as did the teachers of the program, so the mothers had good relationships with the teachers because of the common language.

My mom was very involved, especially in like elementary school, since it was a dual language immersion program she was able to communicate with the teachers and she like really grew fond of them, they had really strong relationships. And so she was really involved, she went to the PTA meetings. I think it wasn't until the teachers ... boycotted the school district because they weren't getting enough pay. And the conditions were really bad. So, I think that was a turning point, and that was why my mom began to go to the PTA meetings, just to speak up about the conditions in classrooms and how like it wasn't clean, like the classrooms are super crowded all this other stuff right so she was always really involved....But they didn't see any changes and then from there, I feel like that really discouraged, well, my mom, and a lot of other Latinx parents from even participating in PTA meetings and talking to administrative people because, in the end, yes they were being heard, but they were just being dismissed like their voices were never really acknowledged, so they kind of just gave up or at least my mom gave up and her and a different mom were like okay let's just stop focusing on school because they're never going to listen to us and just focus on our children. (Isabella)

### ***Role of Teachers***

Participants were also asked about support from teachers. Three out of four of the participants talked about relationships with teachers and adults in general - the two students who did the DLEP said that they did not feel like they could rely on their teachers, they spoke to them when they needed to, one talked about a teacher who helped get her out of ESL, but they both felt like they could not rely on the teachers or the school administration to consistently meet their needs. Both also said that they did not feel like they had found reliable adults until they got to college, and now have adults they can rely on consistently to help them.

The third participant talked about one teacher that she felt was reliable in high school who urged her to join a club that became very important to her and was where she met other people who had similar experiences as her, she felt the club was a safe space for her and she appreciated that experience greatly and appreciated the teacher for bringing that to her.

I felt like after I joined that club I got to know so many other students who are also like in the same boat like their parents were immigrants. I felt like it had this like sense of community that made me feel really safe because we would have events that taught us about different cultures and then we would have this safe space for everyone to like you know, tell their story, you know, and what they're facing. Since I went to a pretty white school, it was like I don't like 90% white and like 10% Hispanic and Asian Americans. I just mostly relied on like that group to get me through my high school experience. Especially since I had like three teachers in that group that were like super super supportive just because they were also a person of color, and so they could relate to us, I feel like it was a really life-changing experience for me. (Florrie)

### ***Role of Extracurriculars***

Extracurriculars were asked about but not discussed as much as the other topics. Only one person talked about doing an extracurricular activity - the club she joined in high school was brought to her by one of her teachers, and she ended up really enjoying that club and her experience in it and called it a safe space for her. Her comments regarding the club primarily revolved around her connection to her peers and the teacher that introduced her to the club, as mentioned earlier.

### **Discussion**

In order to truly understand the needs of first- and second-generation immigrant children and best help them succeed, we must begin with understanding the unique circumstances of their experiences. Children of immigrants are faced with unique and complex issues that their native-born peers do not have to navigate. They are often burdened with the pressure of being the reason their parents immigrated. Knowing that a major life decision was made in order for them to succeed can be overwhelming and daunting (Rumbaut, 2005). Immigrant children are also expected to assimilate into the dominant culture easily, learning the language and the customs quickly, but are also expected to maintain and uphold the language, traditions, and values of their native culture (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2013). The literature reviewed here has indicated that children of immigrants fare better academically, and outperform their peers, however, it is necessary to understand what factors into that success. Much of the research conducted thus far has indicated that family plays a strong role in the academic success of immigrant children. The findings of the current study come to a similar conclusion. Past research has indicated the goal immigrant children have to meet the expectations of their families, to make them proud (Rumbaut, 2005). The current study also found that this had an impact on their desire to succeed academically. The children of immigrants interviewed for this study felt that it was important to



them to succeed academically as this would set them up to succeed later in life. The idea of academic success is the route for financial stability, security, and safety in adulthood primarily having been passed down to them by their parents who had immigrated with those goals in mind for their kids. This was also supported by Felter's (2008) research as well.

The current study also found that the role of peers and teachers was important as well, however to a slightly lesser extent than the role of family. The children interviewed in the current study discussed their feelings of alienation and the strong sense that they were different from their peers. Past research has indicated that negative schooling experiences early on can lead to poor academic motivation and achievement, which is supported here as well (Adair, 2015). The research reviewed here has indicated that children of immigrants are less susceptible to peer influences than native-born peers (Greenman, 2013), but the influence of peers did not come up during the interviews as much as alienation and feelings of isolation and difference. The students interviewed for this study who said they had little to no teacher support during K-12 said that they feel much more supported now in college. They talked about numerous adults, professors, and advisors, who they knew would be supportive of them now and often are when they need it. That knowledge of having someone to rely on can go a long way for a child of immigrants. A sense of connection to peers, teachers, and the overall community builds a positive educational environment for children of immigrants to succeed. The pressure that comes with being the child of immigrants is a force in their motivation to do well academically, but it is necessary to provide support in meaningful ways for these children.

While not every immigrant child's experience is the same, it is easy for them to feel disconnected and alienated from each culture, not quite one and not quite the other. While strong environmental factors like the need to provide success to the family and make them proud are a

strong influence on academic motivation and achievement, immigrant children still require support to achieve those goals. Understanding the unique circumstances they face is crucial in ensuring that academic success is maintained without the negative aspects like alienation and isolation.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

The limitations of the study conducted primarily include limitations regarding conducting the study over Zoom and limitations of the sample. There are particular challenges that arise when conducting interviews over Zoom. One that stood out was the limits of people in the Zoom being out in public where there was background noise. Some participants were difficult to hear or understand due to the background noise of their environment. This made the process of Zoom accurately transcribing the audio difficult as well as the process of correcting the transcription. This particularly became a limitation when reviewing the transcripts for specific quotes, and being unsure as to the main idea behind something participants said.

Outside of the limitations of hosting interviews over Zoom, there were also issues with hosting a group interview. In one group interview, there were four participants being interviewed. One concern that arose afterward was that some participants may not have felt comfortable interjecting to answer a question, or may not have felt they had anything to add that had not already been said, but did not express agreement with anything that had been said thus far. Another concern was that a participant might have felt as though they spoke too much and needed to speak less in order to make room for other people, but when other people did not speak up more there were questions that were left with fewer answers than others. Another concern with group interviews is the issue of social loafing, where someone puts in less effort because

they are in a group. It is unclear if some people spoke less because of discomfort with the topic, discomfort in a group setting, a lack of insight on the topic, or social loafing.

Another potential limitation that arose was cultural norms. There is the potential that some participants did not speak up as much because they may have come from a culture that emphasizes the idea of only speaking when spoken to. So they may not have felt comfortable speaking up unless they were directly asked a question. One final concern was the sample characteristics. It was noted that most of the participants identified as either female or non-binary. There was only one participant who identified as male, but he was in the second focus group whose answers were not analyzed in the results for this project. Of the first focus group, three of the participants identified as female, and one identified as non-binary. In terms of quantity of participants, there was a much smaller number than originally planned. Many people dropped out or did not respond during the scheduling process, so the final number of participants was smaller than intended. There may be a few reasons for all of these limitations, but it does limit the conclusions that can be made from the answers as only a very small portion of the picture can be made clear with so few responses.

In terms of suggestions for future research, a project that includes more participants with a wider range of gender and age demographics is necessary. Other researchers have suggested pursuing research with other measures of attitude towards education such as whether children of immigrants believe their success is a result of their hard work or natural ability and the findings of this research suggest that is important as well.

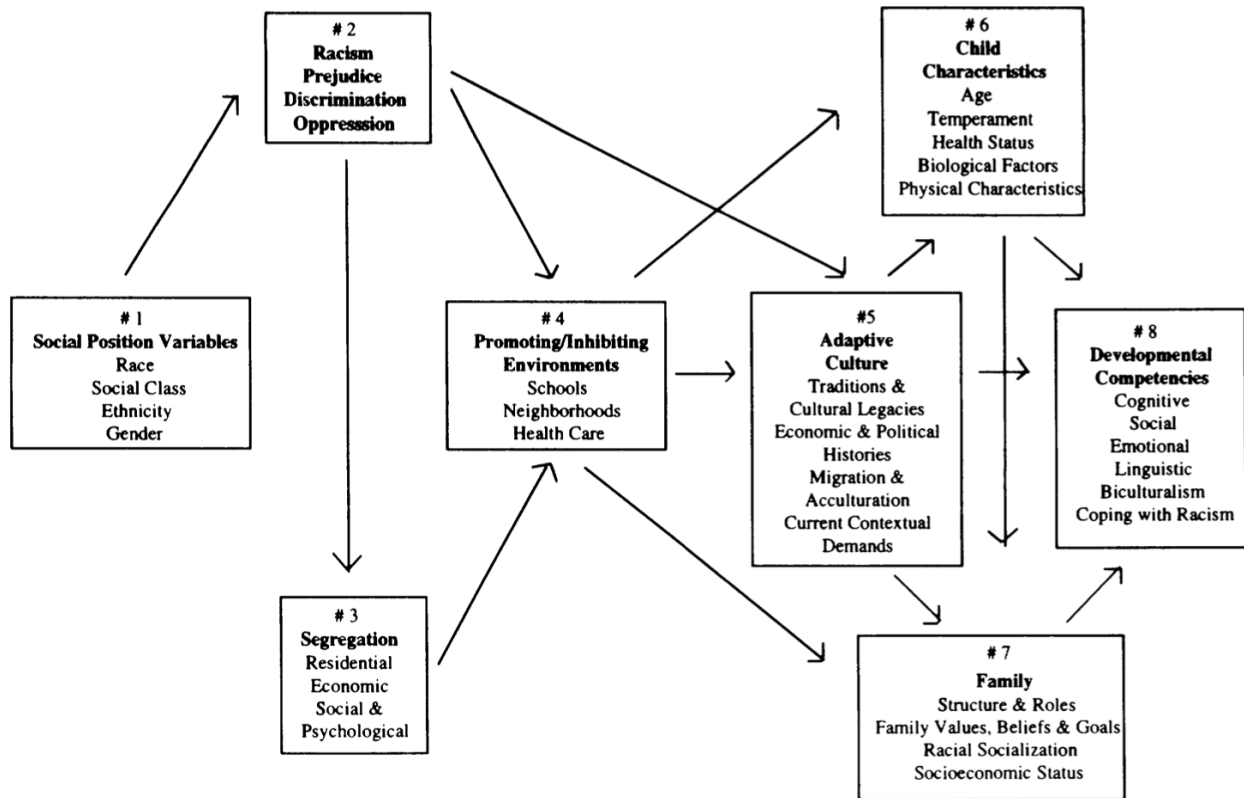
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Appendix A

Cynthia Garcia Coll's integrative model



Appendix B

Interview Summaries by Topic

Parental involvement

Participants talked about their relationship with their families and their parents' involvement and how this impacted their motivation to succeed. They talked about wanting to achieve their parents' goals for them. Some talked about wanting to show their parents that they could succeed and that academic success was attainable. Some also talked about wanting to meet the expectations of their siblings and also be a good example for their siblings and relatives. They talked about wanting to achieve stability and seeing academic success as a means to do that. They also talked about how involved their parents were - everyone said their fathers were

not very involved or not involved at all. Mothers had varying degrees of involvement, people mentioned their mothers being involved in PTA but then quitting after a while, especially after noticing a lack of attention to student needs, then turning all their focus on their children.

#### Peer relationships

This had some variety in answers - one person said they felt very alienated and different from their peers in high school (was homeschooled up until high school). One person said she felt like she had a good community in her clubs in high school. Another person said that she felt like she tried really hard to connect to other peers and was labeled as very social because she tried to fit in and got along well with the other kids, but she just did not fit in. And another person said that she was also very social in elementary school but when she noticed kids started splitting into groups she did not really fit into any of them and when she got to high school she kind of gave up on making friends and when she stopped trying so hard she slowly found her people over the years.

#### Language

Three out of four of the participants were put in ESL at some point. Two of them did the same dual language immersion program (DLIP) that started in elementary school and lasted through high school. The person who was in ESL but not the DLIP said she liked her ESL class for the most part and felt like she had a good space to connect with other children of immigrants. The two students who did the DLIP said they had mixed feelings about it because the schools did not have great conditions for the students or teachers, which was why their moms participated in PTA - in order to advocate for the students and teachers. The moms gave up when they realized they were not being heard, and for one of the participants, her younger brother was pulled out and transferred to another school when it came time for him to attend. The two who did the DLIP

primarily spoke Spanish and English, their mothers also spoke Spanish, as did the teachers of the program, so the mothers had good relationships with the teachers because of the common language. The student who did ESL but not the DLEP spoke English and Cantonese - and while she speaks Cantonese well, she does not read or write.

#### Teachers

Three out of four of the participants talked about relationships with teachers and adults in general - the two students who did the DLEP said that they did not really feel like they could rely on their teachers, they spoke to them when they needed to, and one talked about a teacher who helped get her out of ESL, but they both felt like they could not really rely on the teachers or the school administration to consistently meet their needs. Both also said that they did not feel like they had found reliable adults until they got to college, and now have adults they can rely on consistently to help them. The third participant talked about one teacher that she felt was reliable in high school who urged her to join a club that became very important to her and was where she met other people who had similar experiences as her, she felt the club was a safe space for her and she appreciated that experience greatly and appreciated the teacher for bringing that to her.

#### Extracurriculars

Only one person talked about doing an extracurricular activity - the club she joined in high school was brought to her by one of her teachers, and she ended up really enjoying that club and her experience in it and called it a safe space for her.