

**Teacher Perceptions of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Newcomer Parents:  
Shifting the Paradigm from Deficit Perspectives to Asset-Based Approaches**

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**Abstract**

This study explores teacher perceptions of newcomer parents and investigates how a small sample of teachers are making the shift from deficit to asset-based approaches to working with newcomer parents. This research uses one-on-one semi-structured interviews with three Toronto District School Board high school teachers to examine their perceptions of newcomer families living in Toronto, Ontario. Critical race theory is used as the theoretical framework for this study to critically analyze teachers' conceptualization of asset-based approaches. Research findings reveal specific strategies used by the participants in incorporating asset-based approaches to working with newcomer parents and their children. This study also provides critical reflection opportunities for teachers who wish to engage in asset-based work in and beyond their multicultural classroom.

**Keywords:** parental involvement, newcomers, deficit ideologies, asset-based approaches, critical race theory, multiculturalism, social justice

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For several decades, research has shown that parental involvement positively affects the academic and behavioural outcomes of students from various cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (Antony-Newman, 2019; Auerbach, 2007; Lareau, 2011; Panferov, 2010; Reynolds et al., 2015). Parental involvement in education is commonly defined as parents' participation in their children's schooling, including communicating with school staff, volunteering, attending school events, and facilitating learning at home (Aurini et al., 2016; Epstein, 2010; Ladky & Peterson, 2007). These activities are shown to impact students' academic and social development (Aurini et al., 2016). Although a great deal is known about the positive effects of parental involvement on students' outcomes, systemic barriers to parental involvement, including long work schedules (Baker et al., 2016), economic constraints (Waanders et al., 2007), and lack of social and linguistic capital (Peterson & Heywood, 2007), are magnified among culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) newcomer parents (Hands, 2013; Panferov, 2010).

Although studies continue to support the fundamental role of parents in students' schooling success, teachers generally receive limited training for working with newcomer parents (Antony-Newman, 2019; Chen et al., 2008; Hoover et al., 2002). Additionally, research on newcomer parental involvement has reported that some teachers typically perceive immigrant parents through a deficit lens (Antony-Newman, 2019; Crozier & Davis, 2007; Guo, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). Deficit perspectives focus on newcomer parents' weaknesses, such as their inability to speak English sufficiently when communicating with school staff, their unfamiliarity with the school system, and lack of participation in school-based events (Chen et al., 2008; Guo, 2011). According to Antony-Newman (2019), "no other group of parents experiences more misunderstanding regarding their role in students' learning than immigrant parents" (p. 362). Moreover, some teachers in Ontario identify immigrant parents as "hard to

reach” and “uncaring” of their children because of their lack of involvement in their children’s schools, despite their engagement at home (Antony-Newman, 2019; Auerbach, 2007; Lightfoot, 2004).

In light of this, the purpose of this study is to further explore teacher perceptions on newcomer parents and, more specifically, to investigate how some teachers are working to challenge deficit perspectives of newcomer parents and, instead, enact asset-based approaches. An asset-based approach, in this context, emphasizes the strengths newcomer families have and views diversity as a positive trait. To ensure newcomer parents are supported and empowered by the Ontario education system, this study seeks responses to the following main research question: How are Ontario high school teachers conceptualizing asset-based approaches to working in collaboration with newcomer parents? Sub questions included: (1) What motivates these teachers to enact asset-based approaches to working with newcomer parents? (2) What range of factors and resources support these teachers in this work? Findings from this research may have significant implications for teachers who wish to advance newcomer students’ adjustment by means of meaningful collaboration with their parents.

### **A Note on Language: Conceptualizing Immigrant Parents**

Throughout this study, the terms “immigrants” and “newcomers” are used interchangeably. This is because newcomers also fall under immigrant status; however, these terms are not synonymous. To eliminate confusion, the demographic this study focuses on are recent newcomers who have immigrated to Toronto in the last five years. Specifically, this study focuses on newcomer racial and linguistic minority families. Compared to white and/or English-speaking immigrants, these parents typically endure additional overlaying systemic barriers

based on race, ethnicity, language, and social class. This study endeavors to address and interrogate these barriers by learning from teachers' perspectives on CLD newcomer parents.

## **Literature Review**

### **Contextualizing Parental Involvement**

Parental involvement can be broadly contextualized into school-based activities, such as volunteering, attending parent-teacher interviews, and serving on parent councils, and family-based activities, including setting educational expectations, monitoring child's progress, helping with homework, and discussing school matters (Antony-Newman, 2019). The conventional model of parental involvement in North America primarily focuses on the involvement of parents in school-based activities and events (Guo, 2011). According to Andrews (2013), North American teachers typically view school-based activities as "more legitimate" forms of parental involvement as opposed to home-based involvement for academic achievement.

This narrow view of parental involvement is problematic for two key reasons. Firstly, parental involvement at home, such as setting educational expectations and providing academic support, brings the most improvement in academic achievement and social well-being among students (Harris & Goodall, 2007; Jeynes, 2003). Secondly, if the emphasis is placed solely on school-based involvement, it mainly benefits the dominant social group (i.e., in Ontario, this would be white, Canadian-born, and middle-class families) who more likely to feel comfortable participating at the school (Stitt & Brooks, 2014). Consequently, if home-based involvement is glossed over on the policy level, immigrant, working-class, and visible minority parents who prefer home-based involvement will be perceived by teachers and school administrators as "uninvolved," "invisible," or "hard to reach" (Crozier & Davis, 2007).

Researchers in the field of sociology of education also point out the idea that parents from dominant backgrounds typically possess social and cultural capital valued by the school and feel more confident participating in school-based involvement (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lareau, 2011). Even when parents from nondominant backgrounds practice similar activities at home as do parents from dominant backgrounds, it is the latter group of parents who benefit from this involvement (Antony-Newman, 2019). This is because teachers in Ontario generally value school-based participation from parents, and when immigrant parents' voices are not heard, teachers might set lower expectations for immigrant parents and their children (Antony-Newman, 2019).

### **Shifting the Paradigm from Deficit Perspectives to Asset-Based Approaches**

The knowledge, strengths, and skills immigrant parents have is often unknown by Canadian educational systems (Antony-Newman, 2019, 2020; Auerbach, 2007; Crozier & Davis, 2007; Guo, 2012; Peterson & Ladky, 2007). In their analysis of mainstream teachers' perspectives on immigrant parents, Guo (2012) argued that "rather than drawing on different cultural groups as sources of alternative strengths, experiences, knowledge, and perspectives, teachers may ignore diversity, minimize it, or perceive it as an obstacle to the learning process" (p. 6). However, contrary to some teachers' beliefs, immigrant parents' knowledge has vital implications for Canadian school systems, especially in the multicultural city of Toronto (Chen et al., 2008; Guo, 2012; Panferov, 2010; Patte, 2011). The values, languages, traditions, and educational backgrounds acquired by immigrant parents enrich children's educational experiences. Recognizing and valuing immigrant parents' cultural, social and educational backgrounds can help teachers better connect and build more meaningful relationships with them.

Guo (2012) identified three types of parent knowledge that are traditionally passed down to their children: first language, cultural, and religious knowledge. During Guo's (2012) interviews, the parent participants emphasized the importance of first language acquisition in their children's learning, as it allowed them to stay connected to familial relationships, cultural values, and identities of their home countries. Other parents believed that acquiring more than one language would be useful for future employment in the globalized world. Others realized that the first language is an important learning tool for transferring concepts from first to second language education. For example, English language learner (ELL) students who speak the same language can assist each other with classwork that one may not have understood but the other did.

In terms of culture and religion, teachers can learn from ELL students and their parents about their cultural and religious beliefs and practices. This could be especially helpful when learning about cultural misunderstandings and ways to mitigate them. When interacting with immigrant families, teachers can think more critically about their own positionality and challenge themselves on what they think is considered a "cultural norm" (Doucet, 2011). Due to their limited knowledge of different cultures and religions, many teachers could rely on simplified and erroneous stereotypes, which may instigate classroom conflict and disengagement (Guo, 2012). Therefore, there is a need to move from viewing difference as a deficit to understanding and appreciating diversity as a positive attribute to society (Abdi et al., 2012).

### **Socio-Political Barriers: Devaluation of Difference**

Schools in Ontario reflect the societal and political outlook towards immigrant families living in Canada (Lehmann, 2016). Although Canada has been lauded as a nation of 'grand cultural acceptance,' it has been criticized by social justice scholars, activists, and marginalized

communities for not acknowledging differences as valid and valuable expressions of human experience (Guo, 2009). According to Guo (2009), “While certain forms of knowledge are legitimized as valid, the learning and work experience of foreign-trained professionals are often treated with suspicion and as inferior” (p. 38). Despite Canada’s preference for highly skilled immigrants and the recognition that immigrant professionals contribute significant human capital to the Canadian economy and society, the non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience is the “central immigration issue of the new century not only in Canada, but in all post-industrial societies receiving immigrants” (Wanner, 2001, p. 417).

Linking Canada’s policy on the non-recognition or devaluation of foreign credentials with the deficiency model imposed in the Ontario education system in many ways resemble similar views on immigrant families (Guo, 2009). The misperceptions of cultural difference and knowledge lead to a belief that the knowledge of immigrant families, particularly from the “Global South”, are deficient, inferior, and invalid. Although policymakers and teachers in Ontario are able to acknowledge diversity in our multicultural society, they often remain silent about issues of class and racial inequality that occur in the school and the broader society. Therefore, it is essential for various organizations and educational institutions to dismantle barriers and develop an inclusive framework that validates all human knowledge and experiences, no matter where they emerge from. Otherwise, immigrants will remain excluded from becoming productive citizens of the receiving societies, regardless of their educational and professional expertise.

## **Methodology**

### **Study Design**

To explore the lived, nuanced experiences of teachers engaging in asset-based work, this research used one-on-one qualitative interviews to investigate and understand teacher perceptions of CLD newcomer families living in Toronto. Qualitative research is frequently used as a way to explore answers to a given problem by investigating various social settings and the groups or individuals that exist within them (Berg & Lune, 2017). This research focused on how educators conceptualize asset-based approaches to working with CLD newcomer families; thus, a qualitative research method was used to explore this question in depth.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As a white, second-generation Canadian, raised by a single father who emigrated from former Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s, I have been able to experience three national identities. Speaking Serbian and Macedonian at home and English at school was a normal part of growing up. At home, my dad used to read to me and my siblings in English, Serbian and Macedonian, and made our learning experience genuinely entertaining and meaningful. Although my siblings and I sometimes poked fun of our dad's English accent, his ability to understand and articulate complex historical and current societal issues, do quick mathematical computations, and share his knowledge about the world has always amazed us.

Throughout my K–12 schooling experience, I was fortunate that my dad was actively involved in my academic and social development. He would chaperone our sporting events, attend parent-teacher interviews, and assist in our at-home learning. Most of my elementary and high school teachers remember my dad and his hard work to be involved in our education. In



addition to his hard work, he would sometimes sacrifice his work time just so that my siblings and I would be able to attend extra-curricular events in and outside the school.

As a researcher trying to navigate the complexities of immigrant parental involvement, I must recognize that my lived experiences may be different than other students' of immigrant backgrounds. Depending on their social identities, families provide unique ways of raising their children and guiding them along their educational trajectories. Although my dad, being a white immigrant, was able and willing to attend school-based activities, other families might not be able to or decide not to due to personal or cultural reasons, or socioeconomic constraints. Therefore, it is important for me to recognize my family background and positionality when researching ethnic and linguistic minority newcomer families and how they view parental involvement. Addressing how various immigrant families may be read along axes of ethnicity, race and class is essential to understanding how Toronto mainstream teachers view and work with particular immigrant parents.

### **Data Collection**

Participants of this study were interviewed using a semi-structured format to allow for flexibility within the interview process. All interviews followed the same list of questions and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Participants were interviewed via Zoom where only the audio has been recorded. Before proceeding with the interviews, participants were assured of their confidentiality, asked to carefully read and sign the consent form outlining the interview protocol, and were reminded that they may withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, participants were briefed concerning the scope of the study I was conducting, and the ultimate goals of the research. The data was securely stored on a password-protected computer and was only shared with the course instructor.

## **Participant Biographies**

Three educators were interviewed in this qualitative research study, all of whom work as Ontario Intermediate/Senior teachers, have experience teaching and interacting with newcomer families, and advocate for equitable spaces for CLD newcomer students and their parents. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their identity. To protect the confidentiality of the school, I have changed the name to ‘Toronto High’.

Linda is a Chinese female immigrant who immigrated to Canada at the age of three. She had been teaching for 30 years and had held a range of duties from student support to leadership roles. At the time of this research, she was working as a math and geography high school teacher at Toronto High.

Anderson is a white, Canadian-born male, semi-retired English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher with almost 40 years of teaching experience. He has also done two exchanges to Melbourne, Australia, and has taught law and physical education at Toronto High. At the time of data collection, he was working as a literacy assessor for the Toronto District School Board (TDSB).

Phil is a white, Canadian-born teacher who lived in a multilingual household and, at the time of this study, was an assistant curriculum leader for the geography department at Toronto High and had been teaching for almost 30 years.

Having a diverse sample of participants with different cultural backgrounds, positionalities, and upbringings provided nuance in their perceptions of immigrant parental involvement.

Participants were recruited via email using a snowball sampling method. This method is appropriate when the members of a special population are difficult to locate (Babbie & Roberts,

2018) such as teachers who claim to demonstrate commitment to and/or leadership in the area of asset-based approaches to working with newcomer parents. These participants have been colleagues at Toronto High for approximately 30 years.

### **Data Analysis**

The theoretical framework used in this study stems from the work of critical race theory (CRT). According to Delgado (1995), CRT is based upon the acknowledgement that racism is deep-rooted in North American society. Critical race theorists aim to eliminate racism by exposing and problematizing the deeply ingrained racial hegemonic structures conserved in North American culture (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The essence of CRT, according to Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998), is in the understanding that “race [still] matters” (p. 8) in shaping people’s lived experiences in society. By exploring the data collected through the lens of CRT, researchers and educators can begin to grapple with how teachers are challenging and/or reproducing explicit or implicit racist ideologies and practices within a CLD classroom.

Interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai and checked for accuracy. The interviews were then analyzed to identify themes according to the sub-questions guiding this research study, as well as themes that aligned with CRT. Using thematic analysis to draw out patterns within the interviews helped to code the interviews into prominent, overarching themes (Berg & Lune, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013) that aligned with the CRT analysis used in this study.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The findings reported here reflect the responses of the participants when discussing their conceptualization of asset-based approaches, motivation for enacting an asset-based approach to working with newcomer parents, and the range of factors and resources that support teachers in

this work. This section of the paper reports seven themes, draws on data to illustrate them, and situates the findings within the existing literature. CRT was used as a theoretical framework throughout the study to critically analyze teachers' conceptualization of asset-based approaches, as well as their perceptions of newcomer families.

### **Theme #1: Teachers Are Gradually Recognizing and Validating the Value of Home-Based Parental Involvement**

The results from this study indicated that educators are making a slight renewed focus on home-based involvement, which disrupts dominant and deficit discourses of “good” parental involvement (Antony-Newman, 2019; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Jeynes, 2003, 2012). When asked “What does parental involvement look like to you?” there were mixed responses from the participants, ranging from mostly school-centric to home-based involvement. For example, during Anderson’s interview, he stated: “...the parents who attend parent-teacher interviews; the parents who reach out...they tend to be the families where education is highly valued.” While it may be the case that parents who attend parent-teacher interviews and “reach out” to teachers are an indication that they place a high value on their children’s education, it dismisses the hidden involvement at home.

Although, when asked about Linda’s thoughts on what she thinks parenting should look like, she stated, “What parenting looks like depends on your situation. But I think they should know what their kids are doing in school, who their kids’ friends are, and who their kids’ teachers are.” Based on Linda’s perception of parental involvement, she offered a more inclusive picture of what parenting should entail, whilst moving away from emphasizing school-based involvement. Linda’s belief of parental involvement is more inclusive of immigrant parents who do not attend school functions. While some aspects of her definition include school-based

information (e.g., knowing what children are doing at *school*, and knowing who the *teacher* is), she did not allude to parent-teacher interviews or other school activities and events as did Anderson and Phil.

Linda further expressed how parental involvement matters at all levels of a child's lifespan development, from pre-K to adulthood. While school boards mainly focus on the benefits of parental involvement in elementary school, Linda believed that parents matter at all times, in and beyond the school, in nurturing children's social skills, educational and professional interests, and a "sense of wonder" about the world. Both Linda and Anderson highlighted the importance of parental involvement in adolescent years during the rising age of social media. Facilitating healthy usage of social media content was perceived to be a critical component of "good" parental involvement by the participants. Linda stressed the idea that while parents may not always have the "right answers" for their children's social and/or academic development, parents have the ability to provide a wealth of cultural knowledge to their children in order to help them navigate our increasingly complex society.

The teachers in this study were also cognizant of the cultural reasons why some immigrant parents may choose not to attend schools. As expressed in the literature and by the participants, newcomer parents coming from high-context cultures (i.e.: cultures that typically place heavy emphasis on power-distance values) tend to stray away from interacting with the school, believing it is a disrespectful way on monitoring school teachers and personnel (Guo, 2011; Dyson, 2001; Li, 2006; Yao, 1988). Additionally, when asked about incorporating asset-based perspectives on newcomer parents, Linda stated:

I don't think [teachers] should be saying, 'Hey, you're a newcomer; let's make you that token newcomer parent and be on this committee'... I don't think that's what they want. I think, culturally, a lot of these newcomers don't think it is their position to come into my classroom. Like, 'You're the teacher. You teach'.

The intercultural awareness regarding the perceptions of parental involvement is important to challenging the conventional North American model of "good" parental involvement. What was interesting in many of Linda's responses was how she tried to think through ways she could bring in newcomer parents into her classroom to discuss their "success stories" living in Canada. Although inviting newcomer parents as guest speakers on relevant course topics could be one way of empowering newcomer families, there is an erroneous assumption that inviting parents in the classroom fulfills as an asset-based approach to interacting with CLD newcomer families. Should teachers choose to include newcomer parents into their classrooms, the intention must be meaningful, rather than a symbolic effort to seem "inclusive." It is important to recognize the assets these parents have at the home and beyond that enable CLD students to succeed academically and socially, as well as navigate the complexities of our globalized society.

**Theme #2: Participating Teachers Believed That Asset-Based Approaches to Working with Newcomer Families Need to Involve Challenging Stereotypes That Reinforce Deficit Ideologies**

One aspect of social justice work revolves around problematizing harmful and inaccurate stereotypes and essentialist views on social groups, especially towards marginalized communities (Adams et al., 2007). Participants in this study believed that challenging

stereotypes among CLD newcomer families was one avenue for enacting an asset-based approach. For example, Linda stated:

There are a lot of stereotypes that these newcomer parents are poor, uneducated, fleeing for their lives, or they're leaving a terrible situation. Although, a lot of them are educated, wealthy people back home and are coming for other reasons.

Deficit ideologies on newcomer parents typically portray them as perpetually “poor,” “uneducated,” and “needing to be saved.” Over her years of teaching ESL courses, Linda learned that she cannot make assumptions about newcomer families, even if these assumptions are perceived to be “positive.” She continued by saying: “You can’t say like, ‘Oh, these kids came from China; therefore, they are great students.’ No, because sometimes they’re not great students.”

Recognizing each student on their merit, rather than assuming their abilities based on their racial identity/ies was a common theme during Linda’s interview. Studies on stereotype threat and lift (McGee, 2018) reflect Linda’s idea that, contrary to the dominant narrative, there are stressful side effects of the two stereotypes, as they disrupt learning and participation in and outside the classroom. As an example, McGee (2018) showed that high-achieving Black students seek to resist racial stereotypes of intellectual inferiority while Asian students attempt to maintain the stereotype about their intellectual superiority; yet, both racial groups undergo extra labour in their education as a result of being stereotyped and marginalized. Therefore, educators need to reflect on their implicit biases regarding stereotype lift and threat, which have been shaped by the forces of racism. Combating these stereotypes may allow students and their parents to demonstrate their knowledge and skills without the pressure of upholding or defying these simplified and often erroneous assumptions.

While negative stereotypes about immigrants are relatively easy to spot, positive ones are more complex and, to some extent, just as pernicious (Kay et al., 2013). During my interviews with Linda, Anderson, and Phil, I have noticed that their perceptions of newcomer families were often characterized as “hardworking” and “heroic”. The following section will explain in depth about the hardworking and heroic newcomer narrative and how this may, inadvertently, reinscribe essentialist and racist perspectives of newcomer families.

**Theme #3: Teachers Understood Asset-Based Approaches as Involving Recognition of What They Perceived to be Positive Attributes Shared by All Newcomer Parents (e.g., Hardworking and Heroic)**

Teachers in this study often viewed and complemented newcomer families as hardworking and heroic. Literature also depicts newcomer parents as hardworking and instilling high educational aspirations and expectations for their children as a way to advance the socio-economic ladder (Aurini et al., 2016). However, the heroic newcomer narrative has not been rigorously documented and critiqued in scholarly sources, which this study intends to further interrogate. Teachers in this study mentioned how courageous these newcomer families are, and the challenges they have persevered as they have adapted to the host country.

On the surface, these perceptions seem positive as it depicts newcomers as fulfilling the “Canadian Dream”, whilst simultaneously moving away from deficit sentiments of newcomers as being poor, uneducated, lacking linguistic and social capital, living precariously, and so on. However, delving beneath the surface, the “role-up-your-sleeves” attitude and heroic perception projected onto newcomer parents, which stems from discourses in meritocracy, acts as an illusion of equality and fairness within our society (Markovits, 2019). Meritocracy places significant emphasis on what the individual does rather than the social factors that enable or



disable one's ability to advance in the socio-economic ladder. If the individual fails to achieve their desired goal, the blame is mainly directed towards them without taking into consideration the systemic barriers that impede their success.

Linda strongly believed in the idea of meritocracy. Growing up in a Chinese household in a predominately white, rural farming region, she and her family experienced explicit forms of racism. The only way to seek "refuge" from race-based discrimination, according to Linda, was to "do well academically". She further opened up about her experience assimilating to the Canadian culture, as she described being "white-washed" at an early age. As our conversation progressed from her schooling experience to her perceptions of newcomer families, an interesting finding emerged. When Linda was discussing how she was able to connect with her CLD students by understanding their hardships related to racism, she took a long pause and said:

I don't know how to say it... When there are groups of kids that their default when they are finding the material hard, or when it takes a bit of effort to be successful, they'd always be like, 'Oh, you're just a racist. Oh, you're just picking on me because you're racist.' And I'll go like, 'You don't know what racism is until you actually grow up where I grew up. You're in a school and city where other students look like you. So, don't go there as an easy copout. Let's put in the work.'

Although Linda's statement seemed "well-intentioned" (i.e., expressing how she encouraged her CLD students to 'work hard for success'), there were three problematic claims made in her assertion that warrant critical attention. Firstly, Linda's understanding of racism seemed narrowly defined to single acts of discrimination rather than a broader systemic issue. Based on her response, she viewed racism as explicit and intentional malice acts, by stating: "You don't know what racism is until you actually grow up where I grew up." Although racism

could at times be clearly visible, there are also implicit biases that can unintentionally drive racist behaviours. According to DiAngelo (2018), “All people hold prejudices, especially across racial lines in a society deeply divided by race” (p. 72). As such, the simplistic notion that racism is limited to individual, intentional acts committed by unkind people can serve as the basis of all defensiveness of the topic of racism. Linda’s conceptualization of racism obscures the structural nature of it and makes it difficult to see, understand, and dismantle.

Secondly, Linda’s belief that being in a location where people “look like you” indicates an absence of racism is inaccurate. Although cultural diversity and representation within a place may promote a sense of belonging among various social groups, systemic racism exists in virtually all social institutions (DiAngelo, 2018, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Moreover, racism can be subtle and undetectable to those who perpetrate it. It is important to understand that racism is embedded within our social structure rather than focusing on the micro-interactions diverse students have with their peers and teachers. Constant reflection from all teachers is necessary to unpack racist ideologies that have been transmitted and evolved throughout society.

Third, the statement, “Don’t go there as an easy copout” reinforces negative stereotypes of laziness and victim-blaming among people who are racially marginalized. Little is known about Linda’s interaction with students who have claimed she is “racist”; therefore, assumptions cannot be made about her teaching practice that may reinforce racist behaviour. However, her perception of CLD students who call out on racist behaviour or attitudes might unintentionally uphold racism, especially if it dismisses their lived experiences within a racist society. As many critical race theorists and scholars in the field of sociology of education argue, schools are not independent of society (Lehmann, 2016); thus, it cannot be neutral on issues of racism.

The teachers in this study seemed to admire CLD families by mentioning how hardworking and heroic they are. While the participants intended to praise newcomer families for their triumphs amid adversity, which was perceived by the participants to be an asset-based approach to working with CLD families, it is likewise important to recognize how racist ideologies can play an integral role in these teachers' perceptions of newcomer families. Although seemingly "well-intentioned," the hardworking and heroic narrative depicted on newcomer families will continue to perpetuate racism, if it functions to overlook the structural barriers that inhibit equal opportunities for upward mobility.

**Theme #4: A Central Motivating Factor Informing These Teachers' Practice of Asset-Based Approaches to Working with Newcomer Parents is Their Recognition and Valuing of Diversity as an Asset to Student Learning and Well-Being**

Rather than viewing diversity as a deficit, the participants in this study viewed diversity as an asset that can be used in and beyond the classroom. Teaching and interacting with students and parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds enabled participants to learn different cultural perspectives and build their intercultural competence. Throughout his ESL teaching career, Anderson noticed that students tended to learn their best when they were paired with peers who came from diverse cultural backgrounds and had varying linguistic repertoires.

Providing opportunities for students to work together to achieve a shared goal, such as learning the English language, seemed to be a common practice in Anderson's teaching career. What is unknown is whether or not Anderson allowed students to use their first language to communicate ideas and demonstrate their learning process of course material. The *Many Roots Many Voices* (2006) document, which was established by the Ontario Ministry of Education, indicated that there are many academic and personal advantages for promoting the use and

development of ELL's first languages in the classroom. This idea was also expressed by Ernst-Slavit (1997) who noted studies that drew attention to the numerous benefits of "additive" multilingual approaches that allow ELL students to develop their second language learning while simultaneously encouraging the development of first language acquisition. Although it might sound counterintuitive, providing opportunities for translanguaging (i.e., the process whereby multilinguals use different languages to convey information) to occur in the classroom allows ELL students to maximize their communicative potential.

During Phil's interview, he also stated that he valued diversity in his ESL geography classes because it promoted a learning environment that was "rich in cross-cultural understanding." He was also able to incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy by designing lessons and assessments that allowed CLD students to share their cultural background via storytelling while also learning about fundamental geographical terms. Therefore, contrary to Guo's (2012) argument that mainstream teachers in Canada ignore diversity, minimize it, or perceive it as an obstacle to the learning process of CLD students, these teachers drew on different cultural groups as sources of strengths, experiences, knowledge, and worldviews.

It is essential that teachers recognize that immigrants bring values, languages, traditions, and educational backgrounds to our schools; thus, enriching our educational environments. Recognizing and valuing immigrant children and their parents' cultural and linguistic diversity can help teachers build effective and meaningful relationships with diverse families.

**Theme #5: Motivating Factors Informing These Teachers' Belief in the Importance of Asset-Based Approaches to Working with Newcomer Parents Include Personal Lived Experience in Multilingual Households and Teaching Abroad**

Each participant shared unique stories that inspired them to use asset-based approaches to working with CLD newcomer families. In my interview with Linda, she mentioned that she was able to connect with her CLD students as she was also a newcomer. She endured many barriers, including experiencing violent forms of racism, not being able to speak or understand the English language, and living in a low-income household. Whenever her CLD students felt isolated, frustrated, or needed support, Linda would try to motivate them by representing herself as a role model to them who had fulfilled the so-called “Canadian Dream”. She stated:

When I taught ESL, I would always say, ‘Guys, you could be me’ ha-ha! ‘You could also be a teacher’! But then [the students] would say, ‘No, my English is not that good,’ and I go like, ‘oh, trust me, during my first day of school, I had no idea what the teacher was saying and yet here I am.’ So, I think I was able to connect because of that.

Based on Linda’s story, it could be argued that she wanted to instill a growth mindset for her CLD students by letting them know they can improve their learning if they work hard and ask for help. In other words, Linda was going by the motto: “If I can do it, you can too!” Helping students build confidence and recognize their agency and strengths can maximize their full learning potential and social wellbeing. It is likewise important to take into consideration of the external barriers that are beyond students’ and parents’ control and providing them with the necessary support to enable them to succeed academically and personally.

Similar to Linda’s life experience as a newcomer, Phil was also raised in a multilingual household. His father immigrated to Canada from Germany and his mother was born and raised in Canada. When asked about his experience working in a CLD classroom/school, Paul stated:

I enjoy it! For me, it's very comfortable. I grew up in a multilingual household. My dad and grandparents spoke multiple languages and so, for me, it was always entertaining to hear other languages. So, understanding new Canadian students was never an issue for me.

It was interesting to note that Phil felt “comfortable” working with CLD students. Contrastingly, research showed that Ontario teachers felt unprepared to work in such a diverse learning environment (Antony-Newman, 2019; Panferov, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). Phil's experience learning various languages at home enabled him to feel confident with interacting with CLD students in his ESL geography classes. He also expressed how “fun” it is being an ESL teacher and that it is “entertaining” to listen to people speaking in multiple languages. It could be argued that Phil's perception of language learning followed an asset-based approach, in that he viewed this process as something that is fun and worth exploring, rather than perceiving it as intimidating and a deterrent to students' learning.

Growing up in a multicultural city, Anderson also gravitated to learning from different cultures and languages from CLD newcomer families living in Toronto and abroad. He elaborated on how his experience attending a multicultural school had “enriched” his understanding of diverse cultures, which had motivated him to pursue a teaching career in ESL. Anderson also mentioned that he was fortunate to teach abroad in Australia, which has informed his approach and “sensitivity” to different cultures. He continued by mentioning that when teachers teach a certain language, they are also transmitting cultural values, which was also mentioned by Guo (2009) in their argument about how language is a reflection of culture. Moreover, Anderson had expressed how he valued Canada's multiculturalism. He stated:

Canada doesn't have a specific or, at least in my view, doesn't have a dominant identity.

In fact, if there is an identity to Canada, it's multicultural...I'm old enough to remember

Pierre Elliott Trudeau, who was a champion of multiculturalism and bilingualism.

Although Canada is indeed a multicultural society, especially Toronto, the belief about Canada not having a dominant identity is misleading. Critical race theorists would argue that the dominant culture in North America are white settlers, stemming from Canada's colonial history (St. Denis, 2011). Although multiculturalism was intended to acknowledge the need for increased understanding between ethnic groups and the need to address racial discrimination, St. Denis (2011) argued that discourses of multiculturalism can also reinforce racism and colonialism. St. Denis (2011) further stated that "Multiculturalism helps to erase, diminish, trivialize, and deflect from acknowledging Aboriginal sovereignty and the need to redress Aboriginal rights" (p. 309). This is especially the case when multicultural narratives are used to deny social inequalities and dismiss traces of Canada's colonial roots. In order to follow through on anti-racist work, teachers should understand that the multiculturalism rhetoric may detract opportunity for meaningful conversations pertaining to racism.

#### **Theme #6: Teachers Drew on a Range of Human and Community Resources in their Asset-Based Approaches to Working with Newcomer Parents**

Asset-based pedagogy typically focuses on how educators can enhance the strengths and skills students have within the classroom. However, a holistic conception of asset-based approaches also encompasses a wide range of human and community resources beyond schools, extending to the broader community. As schools are shaped by external socio-cultural values and belief systems, it is important to acknowledge the abundance of resources schools can draw from our constantly changing society. During the interview with Anderson, he discussed how Toronto

has many resources that can be used inside the classroom to enhance the learning and socio-emotional wellbeing of his ESL students. He stated:

You take what resources we have and bring them in the classroom. I think in Toronto, we do have a lot of resources and those resources are human beings. I really enjoy Toronto for its diversity. I think that can be used to make ESL classrooms inclusive, equitable, sort of this great cultural exchange that can happen.

Again, this idea that cultural diversity is viewed as a strength rather than a deterrent in the learning progress of students, teachers, and community members reinforces asset-based thinking. Moreover, all of the participants mentioned that their ESL students felt excited about their field trip to downtown Toronto, where students would go skating at Nathan Phillips Square. CLD students would learn how to skate, socialize with their peers, and build their social capital.

As it pertains to newcomer parental involvement, Linda mentioned that parental volunteering on field trips was not as prominent in secondary education compared to the elementary level. Linda circled back to her belief that newcomer parents do not feel it is their priority to volunteer in schools due to personal, cultural, or socio-economic reasons. In Antony-Newman's (2019) research on eastern European immigrant parents, he noted that several parents in his study questioned the importance of volunteering for their children's learning. Furthermore, he stated: "[Newcomer parents] understand that it is useful for teachers to get help, but prefer to invest their efforts elsewhere, especially when they have demanding jobs" (p. 121). As educators, it is important to consider the range of resources CLD newcomer students and their parents can utilize at home.

Phil also mentioned how he would encourage students to have conversations with their parents at home about who their parents are and what they most admire about them. He stated:



Take time to get to know your students. Find out what their assets are. One fun way to do that is by getting to know them to tell their family story. Who are your parents? Who are your grandparents? Where are you from? What did your parents do before you came here? Maybe what they do now? What special skill does each of your parents have that you admire?

Based on Phil's responses, it could be argued that he was able to use home and community resources to enhance the social well-being of his ESL students. By finding out his students' family background, he could determine the assets his ESL students had. For example, he could assess the quality of his students' writing, as well as learn some of the cultural traditions and values passed onto the students from their ancestors. These values and beliefs continue to inform these students' understanding of the world. Educators should commit to learning more about their students' and their parents' diverse worldviews in order to avoid cross-cultural misunderstanding and conflict.

**Theme #7: Teachers Identified Access to Translators, Support from Students and Colleagues, and Diverse School Administrators as Key Resources and Factors Supporting Their Work in the Area of Asset-Based Approaches to Working with Newcomer Parents**

In order for these teachers to be committed to asset-based work, they require support from translators, multilingual students and colleagues, and diverse school administrators. Over the past few decades, the TDSB has been actively recruiting accredited interpreters for various languages to support teachers and school administrators to communicate with CLD newcomer families. As mentioned by Linda, the biggest challenge for her is the language barrier when communicating with newcomer parents. She claimed that she was fortunate to have access to translators provided by the school board. Also, during parent-teacher interviews, she, along with

Phil and Anderson, would encourage their CLD students to attend and help translate information between the teacher and parent. Should newcomer parents be unavailable or unwilling to attend, Phil mentioned that he would give his ESL students a written message to bring home for their parents to read that describes their child's progress in school.

Additionally, during my interview with Anderson, he mentioned that if teachers are multilingual, they can use this to their advantage and do some outreach to newcomer families. Therefore, teachers can also view themselves as assets in trying to support newcomer parents, if they can speak the languages newcomers understand. Having strong and abundant social networking is key for educators to have when trying to build partnerships with newcomer families.

Finally, it is important to have diverse school representatives who will be able to connect with newcomer parents, speak their languages, and understand their culture. This will foster a more inclusive climate for newcomers as they engage with the school. During my interview with Linda, she emphasized the idea that a diverse hiring policy and practice at the school level will create mutual trust between the school staff and newcomer parents when making education-related decisions for their children. Therefore, it is important that the school board continues to hire more CLD staff members, so that CLD families feel included, understood, and valued.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The goal of this study was to explore how educators conceptualize asset-based approaches to working with newcomer parents, what motivates them to enact asset-based approaches, and what range of factors and resources support these teachers in this work. Participants of this study identified findings that illustrate the need for acknowledging strengths of newcomer parents in supporting their children's education and wellbeing. These findings

comment on the need for a transformative approach to parental involvement that is culturally sensitive and challenges deficit ideologies of immigrant parents. This research builds upon the work of others who have argued for an inclusive framework and definition of parental involvement and further suggests that educators, policymakers, and researchers need to be critical of how newcomer families are perceived.

This research demonstrates the need for teachers to actively and consciously strategize ways to enact asset-based approaches to working with diverse students and their parents. Teachers should also be critical in the way they conceptualize asset-based approaches, as these perceptions might unintentionally reproduce harmful stereotypes and essentialist views of CLD newcomer families. Constant reflection of one's positionality is necessary to combating racist beliefs and attitudes projected onto immigrant families. Existing literature on immigrant parental involvement mainly focuses on how mainstream teachers view immigrants through a deficit lens, without acknowledging the ways they are making the gradual shift to asset-based approaches.

This study highlights how a sample of TDSB teachers are making this proactive shift, while also taking into account areas for improvement in their approaches to perceiving immigrant families. As suggested in the literature, recommended practices teachers should consider when working with CLD parents include recognizing the importance of language support (Dyson, 2001), and taking into account the culture of immigrant students and parents (Guo 2011; Lopez et al., 2001; Sohn & Wang, 2006).

This study urges teachers to appreciate the knowledge and skills provided by CLD parents and incorporate their assets into the classroom without the need for them to physically attend school. Questions teachers should consider when interacting with immigrant families are as follows: How can we incorporate the home cultures of immigrant parents into the school

curriculum? For example, students may be given assignments that require them to interview their parents about their communities or their immigration experience. Also, how might immigrant parents help teachers and school administrators better understand cultural (mis)communication in order to build trusting relationships with all families? Teachers who are committed to learning more about the unique stories of diverse parents will have a much better chance to have effective and democratic parent-school partnerships for all (Antony-Newman, 2019; Panferov, 2010). These questions help acknowledge parents' cultural values and make parents feel that they can provide valuable contributions. They also help students make better connections between the school curriculum and their personal experiences, which in turn will help students succeed academically and build their funds of knowledge.

Future research on immigrant parental involvement should investigate newcomer parents' perspectives on their lived experiences of feeling valued by teachers in their children's schooling experience. More research should examine the significance of implementing asset-based approaches to working with CLD newcomer parents and how this strategy impacts their engagement with their children's formal education. Understanding the practicalities of applying an asset-based approach to working with CLD newcomer families can help teachers make more culturally informed teaching practices. This research contributes to our understanding of the importance of parental involvement, and how using an asset-based approach can enable teachers to capture a more holistic picture of CLD newcomer families that utilizes their strengths, knowledge, and skills.

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