

## HOW IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE PARENTS’ EXPERIENCES RELATED TO THEIR CHILD’S SCHOOL SYSTEM DIFFERENT IN CANADA

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this qualitative research study was to determine the experiences of a group of immigrant and refugee parents related to their child’s school system and interactions with the school personnel, including the teachers, administrators, and school counselors in Canada. Twelve parents who immigrated from Turkey and living in the Greater Toronto Area participated in semi-structured interviews. Results showed that these parents’ experiences were surprisingly much more positive compared to the experiences of immigrant parents in many other parts of the world, including in the U.S. These parents felt welcome and accepted by their child’s school personnel. They also reported not experiencing any discrimination due to their cultural, ethnic, and/or racial backgrounds. The reasons for this difference, and recommendations in relation to how to make immigrant and refugee parents’ experiences related to their child’s school system positive, are discussed.

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**Keywords:** immigrants, Turkish, Canada, parents, educational system

## INTRODUCTION

The immigrant population in the world has increased significantly in recent years. Immigrant families face a number of adjustment and acculturation issues (e.g., Van Oudenhoven et al., 2006) and are considered at-risk for developing psychological problems (Fung & Wong, 2007). The children of immigrants face an additional set of challenges in school. While trying to adjust and acculturate, these children, in many cases, are expected to take on adult roles by serving as a translator for their parents (Trickett & Jones, 2007). These children are further put at risk when their parents do not actively involve themselves in their schooling process due to race, class, cultural differences, adjustment issues, and/or a low level of acculturation into the mainstream host culture (e.g., De Gaetano, 2007; Farver et al., 2007).

For some parents, even though they may want to be involved in their children's school system, navigating their children's school system could be challenging, especially for the parents who are not familiar with the Canadian school system (Perreira et al., 2006). Moreover, low English proficiency and not having access to a translator might also impede the parents' engagement level with their children's school (Ramirez, 2003). In one particular study, bilingual communication and general communication problems were reported by Latinx parents as two major barriers that caused them to be less active with their child's school system (Lynch & Stein, 1987).

A meta-synthesis by Baquedano-Lopez et al. (2013) also indicated that the majority of immigrant parents face two specific obstacles: "language barriers and insufficient familiarity with the educational system of the host country" (p. 369). This finding has been confirmed by another meta-synthesis (Antony-Newman, 2019). Parents who have a lower level of formal education and are working-class could face additional challenges when they try to participate in their child's formal education (Al-deen & Windle, 2015; Carreon et al., 2005).

Evidence from the literature also suggests that the cultural belief, especially among low-income families, that all school matters related to a child's education should be deferred to teachers may further prevent parents' willingness to get involved (Sohn & Wang, 2006). Operating with their educational experiences back home, immigrant parents may have misunderstandings in relation to their role in their child's learning compared to parents who are native to the host country (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Yakhnick, 2015).

Finally, the perception of parents in relation to whether they are welcome in their child's school and the overall school climate could affect their involvement in their child's school (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013). Immigrant parents often report being discriminated against due to their race and ethnicity (see e.g., Martin Romero et al., 2021). The fear of being discriminated against may deter immigrant parents from interacting with the school personnel at their child's school. An additional factor that might exacerbate the problem is that teachers may lack knowledge related to the culture of immigrant groups (Andrews, 2013), and this may negatively affect their approach or attempts to make parents feel welcome in their child's school.

Academic underachievement of some of the immigrant children has been well-documented in the literature (e.g., see Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2006 for immigrant and refugee children; Goldenberg, 1996 for Latino/a immigrant children). In addition, the research question of how parental school involvement helps children's academic success has been examined by different researchers. The literature presents strong evidence that parental involvement affects adolescents' learning and academic achievement (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Fan and Chen (2001), for example, analyzed quantitative data presented in the literature regarding students' academic achievement and parental school involvement, which included home supervision and assistance with homework, educational expectations and values for academic achievement, and school contact and school participation. Their meta-analysis

showed that a higher level of parental involvement was related to higher levels of academic achievement.

The literature shows that the size of the immigrant population from Turkey is rising rapidly in North America, particularly in Canada (Ataca & Berry, 2002; Senyurekli & Detzner, 2008). While European countries have been a traditional destination for immigrant families from Turkey, as the process of immigration to these countries became harder, Canada turned into another popular destination. There is some evidence in the literature indicating that immigrants from Turkey show different acculturation outcomes in Canada. For example, immigrants that belong to low socioeconomic status and are working-class experience lower levels of acculturation (e.g., Ataca & Berry, 2002). Lower levels of acculturation, in return, may affect parents' level of school involvement. In addition to what the literature presents, Turkish parents may hesitate to get in touch with their children's school due to having a cultural belief that any educational matters about the child should be decided by the school and due to feeling embarrassed by their level of English proficiency. However, in order to improve these immigrant families' adjustment and acculturation outcomes related to their child's schooling, we first need to empirically identify their experiences and the challenges they may be facing in their new country.

Based on the research and shortcomings of the literature presented above and the observation of general difficulties immigrant parents experience in the Greater Toronto Area, it would be important to study parental involvement to generate more knowledge and to determine how factors related to parents or the school system may be helping or hurting the parents' willingness and/or the type of interaction with their child's school system.

#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The general purpose of this research study was to collect data to contribute to the overall literature concerning the acculturation and adjustment experiences of newcomer families. The study focused on immigrant/refugee parents from Turkey as there is very little research related to these families in North America. More specifically, the study explored experiences of these parents in interacting with their children's school system in order to:

- a. Determine immigrant parents' level of involvement with their children's school
- b. Determine the level of comfort immigrant parents have and the challenges these parents face when interacting with their children's teachers, principal, or other school personnel
- c. Determine the nature of these experiences (positive versus negative)
- d. Determine the needs of immigrant parents in relation to interacting positively with their children's school system.

#### METHOD

##### SAMPLE

Twelve parents living in the Greater Toronto Area in Canada participated in this study. This location was chosen for data collection because it is one of the metropolitan areas in North America housing the largest number of immigrants/refugees from Turkey. Either the father or the mother of the school-aged child was interviewed. There were five fathers and seven mothers. Half of the participants had only completed a 5<sup>th</sup>-grade level education. Two parents had completed the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, one 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and two parents were college graduates. Their age ranged from 29 to 48. The parents worked in a number of different professions/jobs (e.g., engineer, auto technician, beautician, construction worker). The length of time they had been in Canada since immigration ranged from 5 years to 24 years.

## PROCEDURES

After receiving approval from the research ethics board, recruitment of participants was done with the help of several community organizations in Canada (e.g., the Turkish Society of Canada). Potential participants were contacted and asked to participate in the study only if they had school-aged children living with them. The ones who wanted to participate in the study were contacted by phone to set up an appointment and were visited by the researcher to conduct the interview.

Interviews were conducted with parents from different backgrounds (e.g., different educational levels, different levels of English proficiency). One parent wanted to be interviewed in English; the others were interviewed in Turkish. The participants were asked open-ended questions, with prompts, regarding to their experiences with their children's school system, whether they experienced discrimination while interacting with their child's school personnel, barriers to positive interaction, and proposed solutions.

## DATA ANALYSIS

In order to gather more in-depth information about the parents' experiences, qualitative data were gathered through interviews. The interview data were analyzed using thematic coding (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2010; Patton, 2002) in order to determine commonalities among different concepts and ideas that are shared by the immigrant parents. First, the researcher in this study reviewed the original data and created categories and themes. Later, another trained researcher reviewed these categories/codes against the data to confirm the validity of the analysis (Long & Johnson, 2000). The two researchers came together to resolve any disagreements.

## FINDINGS/RESULTS

Below are the major themes that were determined based on the data analysis. Detailed information about each theme and quotes from the participants illustrating these themes are presented.

### 1. METHOD OF COMMUNICATION WITH SCHOOLS

Parents shared information about how the communication between themselves and their child's school system takes place. Before the students start high school (9<sup>th</sup> grade), the school sends a letter to the parents, with the dates of parent-teacher meetings and possible time slots that the parents could choose. If the document with the preferred appointment time is not returned to the school, a teacher will call the parent to follow up. Beginning in high school, parents receive a phone call, inviting them to come in for the parent-teacher conference. The parents also reported additional invitations to get in touch with the teachers. For example, one parent shared that their child's teacher sends them a note with the report cards, asking them if they would like to meet to discuss the report card.

"Every three months there is a parent-teacher day. Every teacher stays in their classroom. I visit each one of them and receive information about my child's progress."

"They send emails constantly. How we can work as a volunteer, volunteer opportunities...[like] fundraising, school trips." Haydar

"Until the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, the teacher sends a paper home and we choose the time to meet. In high school, they call us and give us an appointment...Twice a year we go see the teacher. But if there is a problem, they call us." Baki

"When teachers want to see parents, they send a paper home. They say they will give us appointment based on our availability. We tell them what time and go and see the teacher." Fatma

“When they send the report card home, they also ask there if we would like to meet.”  
Mustafa

## 2. FEELING WELCOME IN THE CHILD’S SCHOOL SYSTEM

The parents reported feeling comfortable getting in touch with and speaking with their child’s teacher. They also reported feeling that they have easy access to the teachers, the principle, and the other school personnel such as the school counselors whenever they need to get in touch with them for additional reasons beyond the parent-teacher conferences, which are held twice a year.

“I feel like we are a family.” Funda

“They say welcome...with a smile on their face. When I take my son to school in the mornings, I run into his teacher. He says good morning and smiles.” Mehmet.

“[School personnel] usually say positive things, they treat us nicely.” Murat

When the parents present suggestions, the teachers take them seriously and try to address their request or feedback.

“[I asked] for more spelling activities and vocabulary homework for my son. The teacher said okay. I’ll write 7-8 words on a paper, study at home, and then we’ll practice more in school they said to my son.” Mehmet

Some parents used food to express their appreciation for having felt welcome.

"[The principal] is Greek...I make *börek* for him." Zeynep

## 3. COMPARISON OF EDUCATION AND SCHOOLS IN THE HOME COUNTRY WITH THE ONES IN CANADA

Majority of the parents found their education back home more rigorous. They expressed concerns and complained that the amount of homework given in Toronto schools was not sufficient. Some parents accepted later on that the system in Canada is different and that giving less homework may not necessarily be problematic.

“There is more discipline in the schools in Turkey. They give more homework. Here it is too much fun. But perhaps we are wrong. It does look like the [Canadian] system is better.” Mustafa

“My son had very little homework to do. I went to school and told the teacher to increase the amount of homework. He said to me that they follow a certain program and amount of homework. But he gave a book. He said my son could read it at home.” Mehmet

“I sometimes complain about the amount of homework. They assign very little in the elementary school. The kids say, daddy, we do a lot of homework during school, we study at school. I guess the school systems are different. I don’t worry about it anymore.” Murat

Parents enjoyed the school system in Canada more because they were not asked or made to donate money to the school for the purchase of supplies and other necessities.

“They treat us nice. They don’t discriminate. In Turkey, when they call the parents to school, they ask for money donations all the time. They say this is missing, that’s missing in school. Here, they say “what would you like us to do, how can we help you?”  
Fatma

## 4. FEELINGS OF INCLUSION AND NONDISCRIMINATION

When asked about whether they felt discouraged getting in touch with their child’s school or felt discriminated against by the school personnel (teachers, administrators, school counselors, staff) due to their nationality or immigration status, all participants answered “no” or “not at all.” In fact, they expressed feeling welcome and being encouraged to contact the school.

"I never felt discriminated against. It's usually multicultural. From teachers to the janitorial staff, they are all from different races, religion. Because both groups, the one that serves and the one that is served are all different, I never felt or witnessed discrimination. Like we are one of them. We feel like a part of them." Haydar

"[Our] principal would recognize me as soon as he would see me. He would pay special attention to me." Baki

"We never felt discriminated against. We didn't witness any discrimination related to our children. My son's teacher was also my daughter's teacher. Whenever she sees me on the street, she'll start a conversation with me right away." Mustafa

"They know I am from Turkey, but I never felt being discriminated against because I am a foreigner." Murat

Even when the parents didn't speak English and went to the parent-teacher meeting with a translator, they still felt respected and not discriminated against.

"I go with a translator... I didn't feel discriminated against. They want to include the family. They want the child to be academically successful." Elif

"There is no discrimination here. Maybe there is, but I never experienced it. I've been living here for 16 years." Funda

There seemed to be many reasons for the fact that the parents felt respected, had a sense of inclusion, and felt not discriminated against.

#### 4.1. RESPECT FOR THE PARENTS' CULTURE

The parents reported a general sense of being respected for their cultural background.

"They know about my culture...They do...I share food during my children's birthdays...I feel respected because of my culture." Zeynep

"At the end of the school year, they do an entertainment activity for the whole school. Everybody does something related to their own culture. For example, one of my friend's daughters performed the Turkish folk dance, *halay*." Funda

#### 4.2 THE TEACHER BODY

The teacher body is quite multicultural. There are teachers who are Italians, Indians, Jewish, Iranian, French, Korean, etc.

"I know one French teacher, one gay teacher, one maybe Jewish teacher. There might be some Chinese background...Black, White." Zeynep

"There is Korean, Italian, French, Spanish. There was also a Turkish one." Baki

"Teachers themselves are usually either immigrants or children of immigrants. Their mom, grandfather, etc. would have taught them about their culture." Funda

#### 4.3 MULTICULTURAL EVENTS

There are events where multiculturalism is celebrated. For example, the parents will be invited to the school for a social gathering, and they will be asked to cook something that belongs to their culture and bring this dish to the school to share.

"They do activities and get-togethers at school. They tell us to bring our own food, cuisine. *Kömbe*, *baklava*, if you know how to make them, bring them they say. Whatever you make in your kitchen and normally eat, bring them they say." Mehmet

#### 4.4. VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

Parents reported that there were many volunteer opportunities at their child's school. They also reported receiving written and verbal invitations to volunteer in different activities.

“There is parent-teacher organization. You can volunteer there. I help with planning only because I have a small child at home. I attend meetings.” Funda

#### 4.5 GOVERNMENT’S ATTITUDE TOWARD IMMIGRANTS

The parents reported that gathering background information about the nationality or ethnicity of the parents of students in schools is not legal. In Canada, immigrants are celebrated and welcomed. As part of the citizenship test, many questions about respecting multiculturalism are asked. These requirements of the citizenship tests may be planting the idea that the Canadian government accepts tolerance and inclusion of individuals with different cultural backgrounds.

“When you take the citizenship test in Canada, they focus on multiculturalism and nondiscrimination. The last five questions were about this. Following the Canadian rules and laws, there are a lot of people living here, everybody is equal, you can’t discriminate. If you don’t know these, even if you answer the other questions correctly, they don’t pass you.” Funda

“They don’t know we immigrated from Turkey until they speak with us because our kids were born here. Also, they don’t have the right to ask us where we are from. If they ask, we have the right to complain to the Ministry of Education.” Baki

#### 5. DISCRIMINATION IN OTHER SETTINGS

While the parents themselves did not report any personal discrimination they experienced in their child’s school system, they did report about how discrimination could manifest itself in different settings. The participants reported hearing about discrimination in other settings such as in smaller towns where there are more White Canadians than immigrants. They also shared some incidents they heard taking place in schools and college settings, emphasizing that the discrimination was shown by White Canadian students to immigrant students, not by faculty or staff. The parents also reported that the teachers intervene and prevent this type of discrimination as much as possible.

“The biggest discrimination in Canada is between White people and Black people. Not by the teachers, but from students to the other students. Teachers try to prevent this, though.” Funda

“[We heard] some problems in colleges. My nieces are college students. Immigrant students experience problems. Not by the professors, but by the Canadian students.” Baki

“I am sure there are teachers that discriminate against the kids or the parents, but we never witnessed any.” Mustafa

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this research study was to try to partially fill the gap in the literature related to Turkish immigrant and refugee families living in Canada by determining these families’ nature of parental involvement in their child’s school system and the experiences/challenges they may be having in doing so.

The most important, yet surprising, finding in this study was that all of the parents indicated not having experienced any type of discrimination from their child’s school system, which included the teachers, administrators, school counselors, and staff. This finding contradicts previous research, showing that immigrants face different types of discrimination due to their race-ethnicity or culture in many parts of the world (e.g. Martin Romero et al., 2021).

While this finding is plausible, the parents’ statements help us understand the reasons or the factors that were in place that made these parents feel not discriminated against and have a sense of inclusion. First, parents reported about how they communicate or get in touch with

their child's school. It seems like the school system has it in place that if they do not hear from the parents in response to their written communication (e.g., invitation to attend parent-teacher conferences), they make it a priority to contact the parents by phone. This commitment and persistence by the school staff gave the parents the message that their participation/feedback is valued. Second, the parents felt respected for their ethnicity and culture. They were invited to participate in multicultural events at school where they shared information and performance (e.g., dancing) related to their culture. They were also invited to demonstrate and share the type of food they cook. This invitation and interest in the parents' culture helped the parents have a sense of feeling accepted and respected. Third, the teacher body and the other staff at the schools were rich in terms of cultural background. Interacting with school personnel that presented with a multicultural background made these parents feel accepted and welcome. Finally, the Canadian government's attitude toward immigrants further contributed to these parents feeling appreciated and accepted. As it is attested in the literature and stated by many organizations (e.g., Council on Foreign Relations, 2021), Canada is known as a country that values multiculturalism and welcomes immigrants. This positive attitude toward immigrants is clearly made known to others and expected of everyone. For example, the parents in this study stated that in order to pass the citizenship test in Canada, an individual would need to demonstrate a positive attitude and acceptance toward multicultural people.

Another important finding in this study was that even when the parents did not speak English and went to parent-teacher conferences or to different school meetings with a translator, they did not feel discriminated against and, on the contrary, felt respected. Previous research does indicate that language barriers and a low-level of host-country language proficiency may serve as barriers for immigrant parents to get involved and stay involved in their child's school (e.g., Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Lynch & Stein, 1987)). The parents in this study felt comfortable and encouraged to interact with the school personnel even when they were relatively new to the country and had a very low-level of English proficiency. This finding underscores a crucial implication that the school personnel (teachers, administrators, school counselors, etc.) should approach these parents from a developmental perspective, know that their proficiency in the host-country's language will only increase as the time progresses, show patience as they are interacting with these parents, and accept and advocate the fact that communicating with parents through the help of a translator is perfectly fine.

In this study, only two participants had college degrees, and the rest of the parents had a limited level of formal education and held blue-color jobs. As it is reported in the literature, immigrant parents who have a lower level of formal education and are working-class could face additional challenges when they try to participate in their child's formal education (Al-deen & Windle, 2015; Carreo et al., 2005). The participants in this study may have successfully been able to deal with these challenges as a result of the welcoming attitude from their child's school system and a persistence that is displayed by the school to encourage parents to build a connection and to stay in touch with the school personnel.

Analyses in this study showed that the parents liked the volunteer system at schools, and volunteering itself may have helped with their feelings of being included and accepted; therefore, the school personnel should be encouraged to establish and maintain parent volunteer opportunities.

In this study, while the majority of the parents had a lower level of formal education, they did display a strong commitment to their child's schooling and academic success. This commitment may be related to the fact that in the Turkish culture, education is highly valued and there is a general belief that having a higher level of formal education, especially a college degree, will help a child to have better prospects in life.

Another result in this study indicated that parents were generally concerned and displeased with the amount of homework that was given to their children. They compared their education in



Turkey to the one they observed in Toronto and believed that the amount of homework given to their children was not sufficient. However, these concerns seem to have been calmed by the teachers' explanation about how they deliver an education based on the learning objectives and that some homework is completed during the school day. As a result, the school personnel working with Turkish immigrants could be informed about these cultural/educational differences and be encouraged to help with these parents' acculturation and adjustment processes by providing psychoeducational information in regard to how a level of homework lower than what the parents themselves had may not necessarily be problematic.

While the parents indicated not experiencing discrimination themselves, they did, however, report about discrimination taking place elsewhere and/or to other groups. Black students being discriminated against by the White students in schools was one observation they shared. One parent also shared his nieces experiencing some discrimination in college. Because the Turkish parents in this study were Caucasian, the race of their children may be helping them to avoid discrimination by their peers. Further research should be carried out to see how immigrant children themselves may be perceiving discrimination or what it is about a college setting that may be causing some immigrant students to experience discrimination. It should also be noted that the parents in this study lived in the Greater Toronto Area, a city with a large immigrant population. The experiences of immigrant parents living in other cities or smaller places where the number of immigrants is lower may be different and should be explored through further research.

In conclusion, the results of this study may be used around the world to help student-teachers and teachers understand the factors that contribute to the level of immigrant families' involvement in their children's education and learn ways to help parents get involved. The school-based involvement, as was gathered from the data, can include involvement in parent-school associations for event planning, participation in school events that are cultural-based, and regular attendance to parent-teacher conferences to review the student's educational outcomes. The findings of this study could also be used in the training and continued education of mental health practitioners (e.g. school counselors) in order to help them understand the experiences of these families and to increase their multicultural competency. The results in this study can further be used to help the teachers and the school mental health practitioners to develop multiculturally appropriate intervention methods and psychoeducational work with immigrant parents.

Acknowledgement: Special thanks to Dr. Dilek Avci for her help in the analysis of the data in this study.

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