



## Supporting Reconnecting Immigrant Families with English Language Learners in Rural Schools: An Exploratory Study of Filipino Arrivals to Alberta

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**ABSTRACT.** Immigration in Canada has traditionally been associated with urban areas, but rural communities are host to an increasing number of new immigrants. As students of these immigrant families arrive in rural schools, there is increasing pressure on rural school divisions to meet the needs of a diverse student population of English Language Learners (ELLs), though often with limited previous experience with such students. In many of these situations, the nature of the workforce has led to family separation during the immigration process, with subsequent reunification in Canada. Newly-arrived immigrant students are thus having to develop academic English language proficiency as well as adjust to the dynamics of family reunification. This article recounts exploratory qualitative research on how Filipino secondary school immigrant students in Alberta, who are reconnecting with parents, acculturate and develop a sense of belonging when language and content acquisition, social-emotional, and acculturation supports are in place. Data is drawn from interviews with immigrant families from the Philippines and from teachers' written responses to reflection questions on their growth as educators of ELLs. Although the needs of reconnecting immigrant families are multifaceted and complex, the findings from this study suggest a supportive role can be played by schools in assisting such families both through enhanced coordination with the immigrant community, and direct and explicit teacher training in pedagogical strategies for teachers of ELLs.

**RÉSUMÉ.** L'immigration au Canada est traditionnellement associée aux zones urbaines, toutefois les communautés rurales accueillent un nombre grandissant de nouveaux immigrants. L'arrivée de ces familles immigrantes dans les écoles rurales augmente la pression sur les instances scolaires quant à la nécessité de répondre aux besoins de diverses populations d'apprenants de l'anglais langue seconde (*English Language Learners*), alors que leurs expériences précédentes avec ces élèves sont souvent limitées. Dans bon nombre de situations, la famille a dû être victime d'une séparation pendant le processus d'immigration, suivi d'une réunification ultérieure au Canada. Les nouveaux élèves immigrants doivent donc développer leur compétence en anglais tout en s'ajustant à la dynamique qu'entraîne la réunification familiale. Cet article décrit une recherche



qualitative exploratoire sur la façon dont les Philippins immigrants à l'école secondaire en Alberta, renouant avec leurs parents, s'acculturent et développent un sentiment d'appartenance lorsque les appuis d'acquisition langagière et de contenus, sociaux et émotionnels ainsi que d'acculturation sont mis en place. Les données sont tirées d'entrevues réalisées avec des familles philippines immigrantes ainsi que des réponses écrites d'enseignants de l'anglais langue seconde sur des questions réflexives quant à leur développement professionnel auprès de cette clientèle. Bien que les besoins pour aider les familles immigrantes soient multidimensionnels et complexes, les résultats de cette recherche suggèrent la nécessité d'un rôle de soutien pouvant être tenu par l'école en assurant une meilleure coordination avec la communauté immigrante, mais aussi par la formation directe et indirecte des enseignantes de l'anglais langue seconde sur les stratégies pédagogiques qui leur sont propres.

**Keywords:** *family reunification; immigration; rural immigration; English Language Learners; English as a Second Language (ESL); language proficiency benchmarks; rural education.*

## TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY RECONNECTION, ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS, AND RURAL CANADA

One effect of globalization is the vast movement of people across international borders with hopes for an improved standard of living, and Canada is host to a large number of new immigrants annually (OECD, 2018). While immigration in Canada is typically associated with urban areas (IRCC, 2005), the population of immigrants in rural areas is also increasing, facilitated through various municipal and provincial schemes (CIC News, 2016; O'Doherty, Katem, & Turner, 2017). In Alberta in particular, an Immigrant Nominee Program (AINP) allows skilled workers, along with their families, to make application for permanent residency (Government of Alberta, 2017), and several large Alberta employers with operations in rural areas actively recruit employees from abroad and support them and their families in seeking permanent residency (e.g., see Peterson, 2016). The result is that rural areas in Alberta are host to an increasing number of new immigrants.

These efforts to support families in transitioning from temporary worker to permanent resident status are certainly laudable, but the reality remains that extended family separation is often part of the migration process. Families facing limited economic prospects in their home country may opt for one parent to seek employment abroad while spouse and children remain behind; in some cases, both parents leave for employment while children are cared for by relatives. The separation period can be lengthy, with one study finding a median timeframe of eight years until reunification (Farrales & Pratt, 2012).



The term 'transnational family' is often used to refer to "sustained ties of family members and kinship networks across the borders of multiple nation states" (McCarthy & Edwards, 2011, p. 188). Implicit in the term is the understanding that migration is not always a linear process, but frequently involves evolving relationships among family members spread across multiple borders. That Family relationships are enacted across international boundaries is in keeping with a larger trend in the modern world, where interactions and communications, as traditionally defined, appear increasingly fluid and flexible (Hawkins & Mori, 2018). Separation and reconnection of transnational families often contributes to considerable stress (Falicov, 2007; Suárez-Orozco, Todorova & Louie, 2002), and research suggests family separation during the immigration process impacts negatively on children's academic success (Gindling & Poggio, 2009; McKenzie & Rapoport, 2011). The reality of family separation during the immigration process is an important factor for schools to take into account when considering how to best support newcomer students.

As students of these transnational families arrive in rural Alberta schools, there is increasing pressure on rural school divisions to meet the needs of a diverse student population of English Language Learners (ELL), though often with limited previous experience with such students, given the historical trend of urban immigration. Teachers in Alberta have access to a variety of resources to guide instruction and support the academic English language learning of students. These include documents such as the *English as a Second Language Guide to Implementation* (Alberta Education, 2007), materials included in broader discussions of instruction for diverse learners (e.g., Alberta Education, 2010), and the *ESL Benchmarks* (Government of Alberta, 2018a). It is, however, left to individual school divisions to determine how and when this information is disseminated to teachers. In many instances, professional learning sessions for teachers support the understanding of these documents, but to date, little research is available recounting their effectiveness in rural contexts. Additionally, much of the information in the documents focuses on language acquisition, and although language and culture are "inextricably bound" (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 144), strategies and assessment of the acculturation process are not explicitly identified in these documents.

This exploratory study will consider how the settlement process of such transnational reunifying families is affected when explicit support is offered for students' academic language and content acquisition and families' social-emotional needs. We examine the efforts of one rural school jurisdiction in its attempts to support students and their families during the challenges of reunification in settlement.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a review of the literature on students in families experiencing immigration and reconnection, presenting four different aspects of the transnational family and student experience: immigration as a whole; family separation and immigration; academic issues in reconnection scenarios; and culturally responsive pedagogies in schools. While literature on transnational families in general is referenced, readers will note a particular emphasis in this review on the Philippines, since, as will be discussed later, Filipino nationals make up the bulk of the transnational workforce in the school jurisdiction under study. Sources consulted range from peer-reviewed journal articles to news reports. The section concludes by stating the research question that guided this study.

### Immigration in World Context

One impact of globalization is the movement of people across borders in search of a higher quality of life. As a world leader in both numbers of migrants received and in their share of the population percentage (OECD, 2018), Canada receives workers into a variety of jobs and careers, although mainly to urban centers (IRCC, 2005). Immigration to the Canadian province of Alberta—the site of this study—continues to increase. Between 2011 and 2016, over 207,000 people immigrated to Alberta (Simons, 2017), with only 15% of Alberta immigrants settling in rural areas (CIC News, 2016). However, numbers of immigrants to rural Alberta are on the rise.

Various municipal and provincial schemes have facilitated this increase (CIC News, 2016; O'Doherty et al., 2017), as well as the initiatives of several large Alberta employers for international workforce recruitment, often with the support of the AINP (Government of Alberta, 2017). Many immigrants have difficulty qualifying to bring their family to Canada after being separated, making employer support especially valuable in helping such workers realize settlement in Canada (Bragg & Wong, 2016). One particular employer in a rural Alberta town utilizes Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program to recruit qualified employees and then works with them to quickly apply for Permanent Residence and bring their family to Canada (Immigrant Services Calgary, 2014; Peterson, 2016). These efforts have led to an influx of immigrants into areas encompassed by the school jurisdiction in this present study.

Certain countries provide more workers for Canada than others, and this is reflected in the workforce composition within this study's rural school district, where the bulk of the



international labour force comes from the Philippines. It is not uncommon for a significant percentage of the Filipino population to seek employment abroad, with over one-tenth of Filipinos reported to be doing so (Madianou & Miller, 2011), creating a “culture of migration” (Falicov, 2007, p. 162). While traditionally seen as the father’s responsibility to move abroad to work and provide for the family, in recent years, mothers have also started to fill this role (Madianou & Miller, 2011). In some situations, families choose to leave the Philippines permanently and reside elsewhere, such as in Canada.

### Family Separation and Immigration

As noted above, family separation is often part of the immigration process. One parent may arrive on an employment contract, with spouse and children arriving later, with the aim of the whole family experiencing a better quality of life (Jimenez, 2015). In other cases, a child may accompany a parent upon initial entry, with a spouse joining the family later. In either situation, the process of family separation and reunification often encompasses multiple years (Farralles & Pratt, 2012). These separations may be emotionally difficult, and the longer the separation period, the more the lasting effects on the family (Black, 2005; Suárez-Orozco, Bang & Kim, 2011). This migration process of transnational families has been associated with significant impacts on mental health for both parents and children (Falicov, 2007).

While separated, families seek communication and closeness using technology as an effort to bridge the physical and emotional gap. Mothers and fathers often devote significant resources of time and money to parenting from afar via the internet and mobile phones (Black, 2005; Jimenez, 2015; Parreñas, 2005), ranging from scheduled weekly phone calls or texts to money and gifts sent on a regular basis. Throughout the history of transnational families in the Philippines, the decreasing costs of mobile phones and associated services have helped families stay closer during separation, something the government of the Philippines hopes will help alleviate some of the social cost of separation (Madianou & Miller, 2011). However, a gender gap exists in transnational parenting. Mothers can end up “perform[ing] all of the parenting and emotional work from a distance” (Madianou & Miller, 2011, p. 460). Even when the father is at home with the children, the mother often does more nurturing from afar than her husband, who is physically present (Parreñas, 2005). Although technology can assist (virtual) communication during family separation, parents still suffer negative effects from the (actual) separation and reunification characteristic of transnational families.



## Separation and Reunification: Challenges for Parents

Parents in transnational families face various issues related to separation from children and spouse to work abroad and then subsequently reuniting. While separated, the parent abroad is torn between their work—the reason they left—and being connected to family back home (Hertzprung, 2004). If it is the mother who leaves to find work, she and her family may face the criticism that mothers should be physically present to care for their children (Hertzprung, 2004). Once the family has been reunited abroad, parents may find that childcare is expensive and hard to find compared to the availability of extended-family childcare back home. In many cultural contexts, family means more than just the nuclear family, and so adjustments to the lost familial support network can be taxing on both mothers and fathers upon settlement in their new country (Falicov, 2007; Jimenez, 2015).

Reuniting as a family poses many challenges as well. Stepping back into the parenting role after years of absence is often delicate and awkward, as cultural differences between their previous and new context get in the way of sleeping arrangements, food, discipline, and parenting styles (Hertzprung, 2004). The ability of mothers and fathers to once again assert parental authority over children they had been separated from for years is frequently difficult (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). Children of transnational families also face struggles during the migration process.

## Separation and Reunification: Challenges for Children

Children and youth of transnational families encounter various challenges indicative of their circumstances. When one or both parents leave to find employment in a new country, children can feel abandoned, and attachment trauma due to migration, separation, and reunification is not uncommon (Jimenez, 2015). In one study, the length of separation, especially from the mother, correlated with rates of anxiety and depression in adolescents (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). Even upon being reunited, children may continue to struggle. Parents who had left can sometimes feel like strangers and the reunion is often problematic (Jimenez, 2015; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). Children are not always prepared and willing to have their parents once again fill parental roles in the new country (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002). Children miss family and friends left behind when they go to reunite with parent(s), especially when those they left behind were surrogate primary caregivers in lieu of the parent(s) during the time apart (Black, 2005). The separation experienced by children during the immigration process is thus twofold: first from their parents who leave to work abroad, and then later from their primary caregivers when children migrate to join parents in the new country (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002). These emotional struggles



coupled with academic issues paint a fuller picture of the challenges that children of transnational families face.

### **Academic Challenges**

Education is an important aspect of future success for all children new to Canada and is of particular cultural importance to Filipinos. Education itself is poorly funded in Philippines, but it is still highly valued (Hertzprung, 2004). As a priority within families, education is viewed as the most valuable gift parents can give their children (Jimenez, 2015). In transnational families, parents abroad will often stipulate that pay remittances sent home go toward a better quality of education for their children (Dreby & Stutz, 2012).

Many parents in transnational families make education a priority and perhaps even migrated partly because of it; however, students from these families often suffer negative educational outcomes (Black, 2005). Overall, separation from parents has negative impacts on education in forms of depression, education gap, and higher dropout rates (Gindling & Poggio, 2009, 2012; McKenzie & Rapoport, 2011). Education gaps and dropout rates are higher compared to students native to the country and students in families who did not migrate (Gindling & Poggio, 2009). Also, the older a child at time of migration, the more troubles encountered in school; this is true also if separation was from the mother (Gindling & Poggio, 2012). The simultaneous experiences of being a newcomer and being separated from parents and extended family contribute to negative school performance (Gindling & Poggio, 2012; Patel, Clarke, Eltareb, Macciomei, & Wickham, 2016). With transnational Filipino children in particular, placement in Canadian ESL classes has been associated with lower educational success, in part due to non-credit programming, the lack of credits assigned and possible mismatch between the level of the content and the level of the students (Farrales & Pratt, 2012). Overall, the literature suggests experiencing separation from and reunification with family members may negatively impact the schooling of children of transnational families.

### **Strategies that Promote Academic Success**

Research points to some factors that can impact the educational success of students in transnational families both positively or negatively. As noted above, mismatched ESL placement of transnational Filipino students is one factor (Farrales & Pratt, 2012). Trauma is another factor, any kind of which negatively impacts students' abilities at school. Herman (1997) characterizes traumatic events as situations that "overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (p. 33), and knowledge of trauma-informed teaching practice is increasingly important for Canadian



teachers given the realities of global events (Tweedie et al, 2017). Efforts to combat trauma, such as trauma from separating from loved ones multiple times, should include strong teacher-student relationships, classroom exercises to build self-regulation, and a focus on students' strengths (Brunzell, Stokes & Waters, 2016a, 2016b).

Many elements of the school life of a student with a transnational background can be used to promote academic success. Factors leading to success in school for migrant students include feelings of appreciation from teachers and peers, teachers having high educational expectations of migrant students, and migrant families highly valuing education (Hoti, Heinzmann, Müller & Buholzer, 2017). These students succeed when they perceive that their teachers truly care about them, because students need to feel safe and cared for in order to learn (Dallavis, 2014). In this vein, creating a positive relationship between the family and the school is crucial to success for students new to the country to bridge the gap between home and school cultures (Szente, Hoot & Taylor, 2006; Tran & Hodgson, 2015). Course offerings also affect how transnational students feel about school. Music education in particular can be very beneficial as it transcends the language barrier through supporting students emotionally, socially, and cognitively (Skidmore, 2016). Finally, students with access to a community of their own home culture have better academic success in school, regardless of any other factors inside the physical school building (Wilkinson, 2002). Through this study we endeavour to explore how these, and other factors might promote educational success for transnational students in a rural context, through supporting both them and their families as they reconnect after being separated in the immigration process.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

Among the literature surveyed above are persistent calls for further research addressing the issues faced by transnational families. Black (2005), for example, called for studies looking at education programs for parents and other family supports. Other studies, such as Suárez-Orozco et al. (2011) ask researchers to further consider academic performance of children in transnational families. This study contributes to these gaps by exploring the following research question: *How is the acculturation process of rural immigrant students affected when the language and content acquisition of students and the social-emotional needs of reconnecting immigrant families are explicitly supported?*

## METHODOLOGY

The site of this exploratory qualitative study is a school district in Alberta, comprised of 22 schools, serving approximately 3,000 students and over 500 teachers. The school district



encompasses areas classified either as rural or small population centres (Statistics Canada, 2017).

After permission from an institutional ethics body and corresponding approvals at district and school levels, potential participants were invited to take part either in semi-structured interviews exploring experiences of the immigration and reconnection process (students and their parents) or written reflections on experiences at supporting ELLs (teachers), as described below. After the interviews were transcribed, each of the three researchers worked individually to read through the transcripts and the teachers' reflections, seeking to gain a holistic perspective. As the study's objective was exploratory in nature, researchers attempted, as far as possible, to avoid allowing preconceived perceptions to be read into the data. Researchers then worked individually to hand-code themes; in subsequent research team meetings, these codes were subjected to further analysis to reach team interpretive consensus as interrelated themes were synthesized. Merriam's (2009) constant comparative method informed the process of differentiating data sets between levels of conceptualization.

Given the circumstances of these newcomer families, every effort was made in the recruitment and data collection process to align with principles of fairness and equity for vulnerable research populations (Tri-Council, 2014). To keep participant recruitment confidential from the school jurisdiction and its schools, a third party (a local immigration agency) contacted families in their network who met the study criteria to explain the study and invite participation. After this initial step, the agency facilitated contact between the research assistant and interested families, in order to remove the possibility that particular schools or the school jurisdiction might be aware of who did/did not participate in the study. Two interviews were conducted with each family: first in the initial quarter of the academic year, and then again in the final quarter. At the interviews, the research assistant made explicit the voluntary nature of participation, and participants were given the option of being interviewed individually or together with their spouse or siblings if they so wished. Pseudonyms were chosen by participants at the initial interview, and any identifying features revealed during the interview (family names, school names, etc.) were removed during the process of transcription.

### **Teacher Reflections**

Teachers attending professional development workshops conducted by the school district were invited to complete written reflections in response to prompts exploring understanding of the second language acquisition process as experienced by ELLs in their classrooms; teacher confidence levels with respect to teaching ELLs; and use of the



*Alberta Education ESL Benchmarks* (see Appendix). To preserve anonymity, teachers who wished to participate were instructed to complete and return the reflections anonymously at their leisure, with no identifying features included in the response. Teachers were asked to mark their reflection with a symbol of their choosing (e.g.,\* [asterisk]), which would then be used to match respondents in subsequent reflections. In total, six content area teachers, spanning various subject areas in grades 7 to 12, all with ELL students in their classes, completed reflections in the initial months of the school year. A second round of teacher reflections was completed by the same teachers in the final quarter of the academic year.

### Family Interviews

A semi-structured interview with families was utilized to facilitate the use of planned questions based on the research question, but also to allow the latitude to explore other lines of inquiry that arose during the discussion. The questions were constructed following Wengraf's (2001) model of underpinning Interview Questions (IQs) with Central Research Question(s) (CRQs) and Theory Questions (TQs); and were informed by surveyed research on the dynamics of family separation and reunification during migration, as described previously in the literature review section. In the second round of interviews, questions surrounding the family workshops and their effectiveness were added. Interviews began with a brief demographic survey regarding their immigration background (see Appendix).

Seven families participated in interviews: twelve parents (six female; six male), 13 children (six female; seven male), and one parental figure (female, older sister). All participant families were recent immigrants: One parent came first to Canada, and then after obtaining permanent residence, was able to bring their children and spouse to the rural area of the study. The country of origin for all participants was the Philippines; however, some participants had also lived in intermediary countries prior to arrival in Canada. Some families remained partially separated--for example, one parent remained in the Philippines--during the period of the study. Table 1 details the families within the study; all names are pseudonyms self-chosen by participants.



Family name	Parent(s) / Parental figures	Students	Interviews / Workshops attended
Ford	Dustin (male; father)	Rob (male; sr. high) Bob (male; sr. high)	All family members were interviewed twice; attended 3 family workshops
Smith	Sam (female; mother) Jun Jun (male; father)	Gel (female; jr. high)	All family members were interviewed once; did not attend family workshops
Applebaum	Criselda (female; mother) Sarah (female; elder sister of students)	Not included as participants: two teenage sons	Parents/parental figures interviewed twice; attended 1 family workshop
Brown	Ester (female; mother) Julius (male; father)	Michelle (female; sr. high) Candice (female; sr. high) Jeyden (male; jr. high)	All family members interviewed twice; attended 1 family workshop
Bautista	Michelle (female; mother) Michael (male; father)	Angel (female; jr high)	All family members interviewed twice; did not attend family workshops
Schumann	Lyn (female; mother) Tony (male; father)	Lisa (female; sr. high) Jake (male; jr. high)	All family members interviewed twice; attended 4 family workshops.
Torres	Hannah (female; mother) Mike (male; father)	Ashley (female; jr. high)	All family members interviewed twice; attended 3 family workshops.

**Table 1:** Demographic Information of Family Participants (Pseudonyms)



In qualitative research, trustworthiness is said to refer to the veracity of findings “based on maximum opportunity to hear participants’ voices in a particular context” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 192). The research team undertook a number of measures to strengthen trustworthiness as defined in this way. Throughout the study, the researchers endeavored to exercise reflexivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 2009) through ongoing reflection on biases and assumptions via discussions with each other and colleagues. The researchers were also aware of a position of power imbalance with participants, and thus undertook to redress this in a number of ways with respect to data collection. Interviews opened with a thorough discussion of the consent form and its implications, with the interviewer making clear that participants were free to avoid answering any question with which they were uncomfortable, and that they were able to stop the interview at any time, or even withdraw from the study entirely. In several instances during interviews, matters of a sensitive nature arose that were pertinent to the study; however, the research team only committed to pursue further questions with a clear indication to do so from the interviewees. The research team also stressed to interviewees the study’s commitment to confidentiality, and therefore explained the data anonymization process to reduce the possibility that participants would only share what they perceived the interviewer wanted to hear. The research team deemed such measures to play an important part in enabling the voices of participants to be heard.

## FINDINGS

Findings, as guided by the research question, are presented according to data type.

### Interviews: Families

As described previously, researchers working individually identified overarching themes from the data. Upon subsequent group discussion, these initial themes were collapsed into four (*Challenges, Perceptions, Changing relationships, Strategies*), with 27 identified sub-themes. Table 2 presents selected examples with extracts.

A number of themes grouped under *Challenges* included the loss of support networks of family and friends (parents linked this loss of support with difficulties in parenting). For students, there was an expressed lack of confidence in both understanding and speaking English in the classroom, along with adjustments to a new school system and school subjects. Particularly emphasized in the second round of interviews were reflections on the economic realities of Canadian life. For some families, a half-year from the first interview, spouses had still not yet managed to secure employment, and so any savings brought with them rapidly depleted as they navigated the high cost of living in Canada. In



families where both parents worked, a common theme was the challenge of finding time together as a family, especially when parents' jobs required shift work. In relation to this, one participant expressed the irony that bringing parents and children together had been a primary reason for whole-family immigration to Canada.

Theme	Sub-themes	Selected Extract [pre- or post-intervention interview]
<b>Challenges</b>	Canada Parenting	Parent 1: The hardest things [about being a parent in Canada] I know that because it's different, the children in here and back home in the Philippines you can discipline there. . . physically, but here you are not allowed to. [Pre-]
	Canada School Strategies	Parent 2: You don't have time to talk to our native language even for a while, so it makes harder even for a little while maybe. That maybe it helps that there is a Filipino classmates for them to talk to especially during their early months that they are in Canada. [Pre-]
<b>Strategies</b>	For success School	Student 1: Sometimes my classmates, Pilipino classmates, they teach me how to do it. [Post-]
<b>Perceptions</b>	Canada School	Student 2: When I came here, when I'm speaking English, I feel like nervous to talk to everyone, but now I like have confidence, but sometimes not. [Post-]

**Table 2:** Interview Themes/Sub-themes – Selected Examples

Included among the theme labelled *Perceptions* were sub-themes such as (perceptions of) *cultural differences*; *school in Canada relative to the home country*; and *the settlement process*. Striking in this overarching theme of *Perceptions* was the positive framing of participants' experiences with Canada in general, and the school system/school in particular, a theme sustained across data from both first and second round of interviews. Among the benefits of living in Canada expressed by the participants were secondary schools without tuition fees, free access to healthcare, and the relatively safe environment.

The theme of *Changing relationships* served to capture some of the dynamics at play as families reunited after separation caused by the migration process. Analysis of interview data revealed that responses from parent participants differed significantly from student responses. Student participants were more likely to note the positive features of family reunification. For example, one student, (pseudonym: Angel) described her relationship with her father when he was employed in a different country as "kind of awkward," but here



in Canada, she said, "I'm so happy because we are together now." Three siblings (student participants) positively described "a lot of bonding" among their now reunited family.

Parent participants expressed gratitude at being reunited, but in contrast also remarked on challenges encountered through changing relationships. One mother referred to such shifting dynamics in Canada: "They [her children] have more changes outside [the home] that I don't know. . . some things I don't understand sometimes." Parents from two different families expressed unease at how expectations concerning norms for child discipline differed in Canada. As one father explained the contrast, "In our country we can do what we want to discipline our kids. Even if we are using our hands, we can do it in our country."

The theme *Strategies* evidenced the efficacy of social networks. Here, the importance of the existing Filipino community in providing practical support to newcomer families, both to parents and students, emerged as a key component in navigating the challenges of the settlement process. Parents described social networks as instrumental in undergirding emotional support and finding employment or other practical assistance, and students shared how Filipino classmates helped bridge the knowledge gap with respect to school expectations in general, and better understanding assigned work in particular.

### Written Reflections: Teachers

A number of themes emerged from analysis of teachers' written responses to the reflection prompts. Table 3 below lists these commonalities with accompanying interview extracts, followed by a discussion of these themes.

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Theme	Selected Extract [pre- or post-intervention reflections]
Valuable role of direct and explicit instruction for teachers	My understanding of how students acquire a second language has increased as a result of the SIOP training; however, I now realize how little I understood in the first place! [Post-]
	The sessions with [the professional development instructor] were beneficial in helping me to be more aware of the opportunities that arise during each lesson. [Post-]
	I feel that my current understanding of second language acquisition has grown far more than I could have expected. I feel I have an excellent grasp on language acquisition. In this, I better understand how language can be learned, but also how to support learners who are struggling. [Post-]

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Teachers'  
interactions with  
the *ESL Benchmarks*

I try to use the benchmarks to inform my teaching, but not as regularly as I should. [Post-]

I have attempted to use points from the benchmarks to inform my instruction and certainly I can see the potential for their use, but I have not been successful in using them on a consistent basis. [Pre-]

The tracking of these items can, at times, detract me from supporting students as I get lost in all the bullet points. As much as I now understand the necessity of each point to language acquisition, I also feel that there is too much in there for monitoring sake. [Post-]

My current relationship with the benchmarks is simply to do them for the sake of getting them done ... I don't have a meaningful connection between those numbers and any specific or effective classroom practices for students who are stalled or struggling in their language acquisition. [Pre-]

The document is too large, and the time it would take to assess a child on all of those points is huge. With the large number of ELL students I have, it is actually difficult to make use of all of the information provided in that document. The amount of information is actually also overwhelming. I still do not refer to these documents to inform my instruction, rather, I refer to students writing, speaking, and ability to comprehend texts. [Post-]

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Professional  
learning as a tool to  
overcome  
challenges

After explicitly trying some techniques [from the professional learning sessions] geared towards helping ELL students learn, I am more confident in my ability to provide the appropriate supports for my students. Having worked with more ELL students I am also more confident in understanding where they are at and what they could benefit from. I am confident that given more time in a day to prepare, I could create a class that has multiple activities and strategies implemented to meet the needs of a variety of ELL students. It will take me a few years to integrate all that I have learned, but my ability to understand and meet the needs of my students has already begun to improve. [Post-]

The strategies provided [in professional learning sessions] have been extremely useful, especially the focus on vocabulary development. I spent a lot of time focusing on vocabulary strategies with students so that they could use them in all classes. The growth seen with the student's ability to write and read was amazing after only a few lessons. [Post-]



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The additional resources that we were provided with were (and continue to be) quite helpful in building my confidence in the field of meeting the needs of the ELL students. [Post-]

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**Table 3:** Teacher Reflection Themes – Selected Examples

Firstly, the importance of direct and explicit instruction for teachers was highlighted, both in terms of enhancing awareness of the second language acquisition process, and in increasing recognition of how the *ESL Benchmarks* might be better utilized. As one participant reflected in a post-training response: “I feel that my current understanding of second language acquisition has grown far more than I could have expected.” With respect to the *Benchmarks*, direct and explicit instruction were seen to be of particular benefit in helping participants develop awareness of what they thought they knew, but actually did not. One teacher, for example, expressed a strong sense of self-efficacy in the first reflection, self-describing as “very confident with the *Alberta ESL Benchmarks*. I have a strong working knowledge of all areas and what is entailed in each level of learning.” Post-professional development session, however, the same participant’s reflections contrasted sharply with their earlier self-confidence: “Although I felt I had a strong understanding of it before starting, I realized quickly that my understanding was more basic. The training in SIOOP [Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol] and other strategies have supported me in understanding the *Benchmarks* much more, especially in regard to informing instruction.”

Improved knowledge of the *Benchmarks* notwithstanding, two-thirds of participants expressed doubts surrounding the document’s application. Of six participants, two gave positive assessments of the *Benchmarks* in their post-reflection: One teacher described them as “useful to helping students”, and another remarked on the *Benchmarks’* role in providing “a better sense of the steps required in the development of English proficiency.” Four of six teachers, however, were less positive. One post-reflection indicated the participant felt “pretty much the same” about the *Benchmarks* after the training sessions, expressing the view that “the document is too large,” making its application for assessment to each ELL impractical. This view was echoed by another participant in a pre-training reflection, who described the *Benchmarks* as “far too unwieldy to be practical or meaningful.” This same participant’s post-training reflection did not result in a more positive view, but equated use of the *Benchmarks* with “using a screwdriver to pound in a nail. . . I can do it, but it’s not the right tool for the job. . . [there are] way too many categories to assess any of them meaningfully.”



A commonly expressed theme was an understanding gap in how the *Benchmarks* might apprise classroom instructional practices, one of the stated purposes envisioned by its creators (Government of Alberta, 2018b). As one teacher put it, "As a tool to inform instruction, I do not refer to the [*Benchmarks*] document at all, simply the final *Benchmark* number." Another participant expressed a similar view: "As a general tool I am confident in using the [*Benchmarks*] level to gauge where a student is and what supports are required in the classroom," but went on to add that, "Aside from using the overall [number] as a tool to see what the general understanding of a student/class is, I have not explicitly used the *Benchmarks* to inform my instruction." Given the ambiguities expressed by teachers in this study, the use and application of the *Benchmarks* by teachers presents intriguing possibilities for further research.

Finally, participants' written responses highlighted the role of professional development sessions in helping to overcome challenges associated with instruction of ELLs within mainstream classrooms. Cited challenges included a lack of time to prepare specific strategies for ELLs in the midst of the demands of other classroom preparation; the sheer numbers of ELLs in any one class; the masking of low reading proficiency by spoken language ability; and instruction of content-specific vocabulary. However, participants highlighted professional development sessions as positive steps toward supporting these learners. One teacher described the resources provided in the training sessions as "quite helpful in building my confidence in the field of meeting the needs of ELL students. . . . With my increased level of confidence, I have been able to offer them concrete ways in which they can participate in their language acquisition." Another teacher's post-training response remarked that strategies provided in the professional development sessions were overall "extremely useful," and identified in particular "the focus on vocabulary development." Describing application of vocabulary strategies to a specific class, the teacher noted "the growth seen with the student's ability to write and read was amazing after only a few lessons."

## DISCUSSION

The belonging and acculturation needs of transnational and reconnecting families settling within a rural school jurisdiction were seen to be multifaceted and complex, even within the small sample considered in this study. The discussion presented here, therefore, set in the context of an exploratory inquiry, must be seen in light of this complexity. However, we assert still that these findings offer insight into how other rural school jurisdictions might offer support to ELLs and their reconnecting families.



First, the findings serve as an efficacious reminder to a reality unfortunately too often forgotten: That students' academic progress cannot be considered in isolation but must be viewed as a subset of the larger complexities of challenges involved with the migration process in general, and family separation/reunification in particular. Such pressures are invariably brought to bear on student learning, and so to view academic language acquisition without consideration of the impact of these broader family dynamics is to overlook a critical dimension of the process. Schools and teachers of migrant students must look past the more apparent need for language learning and realize that adjustment to life in Canada involves considerably more (Due, Riggs, & Mandara, 2015). The findings of this study serve to underscore the import of a holistic perspective on education (Miller, Nigh, Binder, Novack & Crowell, 2018).

Second, as schools attempt to support ELLs within the context of reunifying families, this study's findings also reinforce another obvious, but often overlooked point: the importance of forging support partnerships with the immigrant community that the school jurisdiction seeks to serve (Tran & Hodgson, 2015). Offering *support for*, rather than *with*, the community a school jurisdiction wishes to assist overlooks a critical element. A central benefit of the family workshops conducted, beyond the actual content, proved to be the networking afforded by bringing together families in similar circumstances. These families then began to forge informal networks for practical assistance ranging from help finding employment to sharing household responsibilities like cooking. We therefore recommend that schools/school jurisdictions, before rushing to provide programming to lend practical assistance, first consider opportunities to partner with *existing* networks—formal or informal—within the target community itself. Such an approach may represent a more sustainable and effective means of both identifying and supporting the complex and multifaceted needs of reconnecting transnational families.

Third, the findings affirm the important role of direct and explicit training for teachers in classroom strategies appropriate to ELLs. Comparative analysis of data from pre- and post-training teacher reflections indicate growth as practitioners, underscoring the benefits of such training. This serves as a reminder that teacher knowledge of the unique learning needs of ELLs cannot be assumed, and that targeted in-service professional development can play an important role in helping teachers better support these learners. Data also yielded a complex picture of teachers' relationship with the *Alberta K-12 ESL Benchmarks*. While findings showed both teachers' apprehension toward the *Benchmarks* as well as the valuable role of explicit teacher training in supporting their use, much work remains to be done with respect to utilizing the *Benchmarks* as a tool informing classroom instruction.



## CONCLUSION

This study explored how support offered by a rural school district to reunifying families might impact the language acquisition of ELL students. Data drawn from semi-structured interviews with families and written reflections from teachers of ELLs pointed toward the multifaceted and complex challenges encountered by families separated and subsequently reunified during the immigration process. Findings underlined the relevance of a holistic approach to students' learning by schools and their jurisdictions in seeking to support reunifying families. The results also pointed to consideration of support networks already extant within migrant communities, with the aim of offering support *with*, rather than simply *for*, intended recipients. Data from teacher reflections highlighted the benefits of direct and explicit professional development on instructional strategies for ELLs for teachers, with particular attention to expanding the role and use of the *Alberta K-12 ESL Benchmarks*. While this study is exploratory and preliminary in nature, the initial conclusions drawn are proffered forward in the hopes that other rural schools and school jurisdictions might benefit in their own endeavours to support the increasing number of families who are making rural Canada their new home.

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## APPENDIX

### DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

#### Teacher Reflection Questions

Please reflect on and respond to the following questions regarding your **current** thoughts on teaching English Language Learners. Be as comprehensive as possible in your responses.

- What is your **current** level of understanding the second language acquisition process that the English Language Learners in your content classes are going through?
- What is your **current** level of confidence in understanding and meeting the needs of the English Language Learners in your content classes?
- What is your **current** level of understanding and confidence in using the Alberta Education ESL Benchmarks as an assessment tool **and** as a tool to inform instruction?

#### Interview Questions – Students

Central Research Question (CRQ)	Theory Question (TQ)	Interview Question (IQ)
CRQ1: How is the acculturation process of immigrant students affected when the language and content acquisition of students and social-emotional needs of reconnecting immigrant families are explicitly supported?	<p>TQ1: Are children separated from families during migration experience anxiety and depression (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010)?</p> <p>TQ2: Does family separation during migration result in a negative impact on educational success (Gindling and Poggio, 2009, 2012)?</p>	<p>IQ1(a): What are some of the challenges you face within your family relationships? IQ1(b): How might these affect your learning at school?</p> <p>IQ2(a): How are the relationships between you and your parents different now than they were in your home country? IQ2(b) How might this affect your learning at school?</p>



		<p>IQ3: What do you think is most difficult about being a student in Canada?</p> <p>IQ4(a): Are there adjustments to social life in Canada that make it difficult for you to learn in school?</p> <p>IQ4(b): How about emotional adjustments that might make it difficult for you to learn in school?</p> <p>IQ4(c): Are there any cultural adjustments that might make it difficult for you to learn at school?</p> <p>IQ5: In general, what things help you learn at school?</p>
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### Interview Questions – Parents

Central Research Question (CRQ)	Theory Question (TQ)	Interview Question (IQ)
<p>CRQ1: How is the acculturation process of immigrant students affected when the language and content acquisition of students and social-emotional needs of reconnecting immigrant families are explicitly supported?</p>	<p>TQ1: Are parents separated from children during migration experiencing stresses of separation and reunification (Falicov, 2007)?</p> <p>TQ2: Do parents perceive that family separation during migration results in a negative impact on educational success (Gindling and Poggio, 2009, 2012)?</p>	<p>IQ1(a): What are some of the challenges you face within your family relationships?</p> <p>IQ1(b): How might these be affecting your children's learning at school?</p> <p>IQ2(a): How are the relationships between you and your children different now than they were in your home country?</p> <p>IQ2(b) How might this affect your children's learning at school?</p>



		<p>IQ3: What do you think is most difficult about being a parent in Canada?</p> <p>IQ4(a): Are there adjustments to social life in Canada that make it difficult for your children to learn in school?</p> <p>IQ4(b): How about emotional adjustments that might make it difficult for your children to learn in school?</p> <p>IQ4(c): Are there any cultural adjustments that might make it difficult for your children to learn at school?</p> <p>IQ5: In general, what things do you think help your children to learn at school?</p>
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