

**Exploring the Needs of Newcomers for Effective Transitions to U.S. Schools**

by

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**Abstract**

The thesis capstone project explores the question of how educators can effectively support newcomer students in adapting to U.S./English speaking schools. A professional development was developed to aid educators with this challenge. A review of the existing literature reveals that fostering newcomers' sense of belonging facilitates an effective and positive transition. Several factors contribute to a newcomer's sense of belonging including awareness of school expectations, perceptions of newcomers/teachers, school environment, and teacher preparation. These factors are categorized into internal factors such as perceptions of newcomers and external factors such as teacher preparation. These factors have been found to affect the newcomers' second language acquisition (SLA) and reflect on their sense of belonging. The professional development model for educators of newcomer students focuses on engaging educators in the transition of newcomers from the outset and maintaining ongoing communication. Further research could explore the perspectives of newcomers during their transition phases.

*Keywords:* English language learners, newcomer students, sense of belonging, teacher preparation, professional development

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Port Chester School District is home to over thirty percent of English Language Learners (ELLs) ranging from newcomers to Formally Limited English Proficiency (FLEP) students among the four elementary schools, one middle school and one high school (Port Chester Public Schools, 2024). Throughout the school year, there have been an increasing number of newcomer students. I have observed these students struggling to transition and adapt into our school that is culturally different from their home countries. These students experience difficulties with acquiring English, academics, and socialization. Newcomer students need more support from their teachers and both the school's and district's administration to succeed in this challenging and new environment that they have been placed in. Oftentimes, these students come to the United States due to a multitude of possible situations that may include but are not limited to a lack of access to education, financial insecurity, or personal trauma (Russell & Mantilla-Blanco, 2022).

The topic of newcomers transitioning into schools in the United States has been discussed among many educators (e.g. Gray, 2023; Kolano et al., 2013; Matejko et al., 2024). My interest in this topic stems from speaking to my colleagues that have more experience teaching ELLs. To gain a better understanding of newcomer ELLs as they transition into our schools, I surveyed my colleagues in June of 2024 via electronic mail, on what issues they believed were most difficult to overcome for their ELL students. The majority of responses were aimed at the lack of support for newcomers' transitions into the American school system. As this trend emerged across the educators I surveyed, it became more apparent how ill-equipped ELLs were in the classroom as newcomers.

The focus of this thesis capstone project is to explore the factors that affect newcomer ELLs and their transitioning into their school community. The transition of newcomers to their new school sets a precedent for the trajectory of their school careers and future successes. An area of success that is affected is a newcomer's second language acquisition. Their English language development needs to be supported at the start of their transition through culturally appropriate practices. Newcomers need to have a sense of belonging in order for them to improve their English language proficiency. A smooth and supportive transition creates a more confident and well-adjusted student who will be able to succeed beyond the classroom.

The cultural differences between schools in differing countries are significant. Newcomer students often face these cultural differences without much support which can be detrimental to their success within their first year. In addition to culture, newcomers are also challenged by the expectations of their new schools that are made more difficult when the schools are unprepared to properly support their integration and thus creating a disparity for these newcomers as they are left to learn their schools' policies and norms (Elia et al., 2022). A practice that can be utilized to support the transition of these students is placing a "...focus on [their] sense of school belonging [...] because incorporation into society is relevant [...] for academic success" (Abu El-Haj, 2015 & Levinson, 2005, as cited in Russell & Mantilla-Blanco, 2022, p. 619).

It is also important that teachers receive ongoing support and professional development on educating newcomer ELL students due to the change in student populations and the need to provide adequate accommodations that are culturally and linguistically relevant to the newcomers, along with social guidance (Gray, 2023). Supporting newcomers and ELLs of all proficiency levels is the responsibility of all parties within the school, despite not being a certified TESOL or Bilingual Education teacher. To support newcomers, is to provide them with

the right tools, resources, and programs that will allow them to thrive in an environment that is unfamiliar to them.

In Chapter 2 I review the literature on the transition of newcomers. In doing so, I will address problems and suggest solutions to answer the following question: How can educators effectively support newcomer students, or newcomers, in adapting to U.S./ English-speaking schools? Chapter 3 describes the professional development that I created to help educators address the transition of their newcomer students. Chapter 3 supplies teachers with tools that will assist them in getting to know more about their newcomer students and families which will aid teachers in designing lessons and using instructional strategies targeted for their diverse students. In Chapter 4, I conclude with a summary of the research and some overall takeaways. Finally, I will discuss implications for learning and teacher, as well as recommendations for further research on the topic newcomer transitions into U.S. schools.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This Chapter discusses the challenges that both newcomer students and educators face when children transition into English speaking schools with a review of the literature on newcomers. It explores the internal and external factors affecting newcomers' acquisition of a new language, the strategies available to support these students and their educators, and solutions currently being implemented by schools. To better understand these issues, this Chapter draws on the conceptual framework consisting of: Humanistic Learning Theory (Maslow, 1943), Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and Output Hypothesis (Swain, 2005). This conceptual framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of second language acquisition (SLA) and informs the development of effective strategies to support newcomer students throughout their learning experience.

### **Integrating Educational Theories to Support Newcomer Students**

The Humanistic Learning Theory (Maslow, 1943), Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and Swain's (2005) Output Hypothesis provide a unique perspective on the learning process and highlights effective strategies to overcome several challenges faced by newcomers. Maslow's (1943) Humanistic Learning Theory is a tiered theory based on motivation with the goal of reaching self-actualization, defined as "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (p. 382). That is, it focuses on the significance of personal growth and self-actualization. In contrast, Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory (SCT) emphasizes that language acquisition and cognitive development occur from social and cultural interactions, not exclusively through biological factors. Swain's Output Hypothesis proposes the significance of producing language, speaking and writing, in the process of language development. Students need opportunities to speak and write in the target

language in order for them to be proficient in the target language. Each of these theories supports the notion of the importance of newcomer students having a sense of belonging after transferring to a new school in the United States.

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs is a theory of self-motivation. The theory is often depicted as a pyramid of five sections or needs, from bottom to top; physiological, safety, love/belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. This theory suggests that all humans have needs that must be satisfied before moving on to the next need. Physiological needs such as food, water, and shelter as well as safety needs including bodily and health need to be fulfilled before one can feel a sense of belonging, the next level. This theory helps educators understand the importance of ensuring newcomers have their basic needs and feel safe before they can truly start to feel a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2018). This theory also indicates that humans reach their full potential, they need to feel a sense of belonging and have a strong self-esteem. This applies to newcomer students because these students have much potential that needs to be unlocked by the support of their teachers, school, and community. Though this theory speaks to personal needs, it is necessary to expand on how needs like belongingness, safety and security are dependent on interpersonal relationships with the social world. Schools and their staff have an obligation to these newcomer students to provide resources that allow these social relationships to come into being.

Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural theory (SCT) argues cognitive development is a social process influenced by social interactions and cultural context. Indeed, children learn through their interactions and benefit the most when those interactions are occurring with more knowledgeable peers. Social interactions promote language acquisition (Wright, 2019); however, it is challenging for newcomers to interact with their peers when they first arrive. It is crucial for



teachers to make the students feel welcomed and supported so they feel comfortable interacting. To engage newcomers in interactions, teachers must get to know their newcomers and facilitate discussions that are of interest to their newcomers (Elia et al., 2022).

A key concept of SCT is the Zone of Proximal Development referred to as “the distance or the cognitive gap between what a child can do unaided and what the child can do jointly and in coordination with a more skilled expert” (Gibbons, 2015, p. 13). When teachers work with their students’ ZPD, it aids in their sense of belonging because the teacher is meeting the child where they are at and recognizing they are capable of more challenging tasks with scaffolds (Gibbons, 2015). Oftentimes, newcomers are seen as incapable and given tasks that are too easy, and can be insulting to the student, or too difficult reinforcing feelings of ineptness surrounded by others who are properly challenged. Educators must attend to their newcomers’ ZPD by creating learning experiences that challenge all students at their level with the right supports. Working within their ZPD will build a sense of belonging within their learning community.

In her study of French immersion students, Merrill Swain (2005) noted that the students in the program were able to develop French language comprehension that was comparable to the native French speaking students; however, their speaking proficiencies were delayed. The study of French immersion students prompted Swain’s (2005) Output Hypothesis which states “the act of producing language (speaking and writing) constitutes, under certain circumstances, part of the process of second language learning” (p. 471). It prioritizes learning experiences that nurture’s practice with their output, speaking and writing. Students who do not feel comfortable in their environment are unlikely to successfully produce the second language (L2). In fact, many newcomer students may be unwilling to participate in classroom activities/ discussions (Pannel et al., 2017). However, when teachers create a welcoming, stress-free environment, their

willingness to communicate in their home language and L2, which is typically English in most U.S. schools, increases (Russell & Mantilla-Blanco, 2022). Producing English is crucial for the success of all ELLs and is one of their main goals in their education. Without adequate support during their transition in and out of the classroom, newcomer students may lack the confidence and motivation to learn and speak English which is detrimental to their language development and education. Thus, educators must take the time to create learning experiences that are relevant and encourage newcomers to speak through low-stake activities and discussions.

### **Newcomers and Teachers' Internal Factors**

The sense of belonging a newcomer student can feel within their new school can significantly impact their overall experience, especially for those who may not be aware of school culture and practices in American schools. This sense of belonging is influenced by internal factors such as being unsure of school expectations (both the newcomer students and the teachers), feelings of rejection, and perceptions of academic achievement.

By looking into these factors, educators can help alleviate the stress and anxiety faced by newcomers while also enlightening students and assisting them in acclimating to their new school.

### **Unsure of School Expectations**

Newcomers and teachers in American schools are often left unsure of the expectations of their new school and students, respectively, which are due to various “cultural differences” (Kolano et al., 2013, p. 42) and the necessity for implicit, or *common sense*, behaviors of American schools to be explicitly taught, along with an acknowledgment of the importance of newcomers forming positive relationships with school staff (Hos et al., 2019).

Schools have expectations of their own for both teachers and students. Some school expectations for students include familiarizing and following all policies, rules, and regulations on student conduct, attending school regularly and on time, discourage behaviors that are inappropriate and report incidents, being respectful and positive through tone and body language, and following safety protocols (Port Chester School District, 2017). School expectations are not explicitly taught to newcomer students which can influence the assumptions about newcomers made by school faculty. According to four teachers and staff interviewed by Szylk et al. (2020), one of the teachers felt that they had too high of expectations for their newcomer students regarding the knowledge of U.S. school culture. Due to their high expectations, these teachers claimed their perspectives of newcomers' experiences changed (Szylk et al., 2020, p. 136). In Sato and Hodge's (2016) study of 6 physical education (PE) teachers across 5 elementary schools in Ohio, Muslim ELL students and their families reported experiencing a lack of respect because of their gender and expressed reluctance for their daughters to participate in a PE class, despite its importance and requirement for students.

In addition, Mrs. Conway, a PE teacher of both ELLs and native English speaker (NES) students, experienced frustrations teaching newcomer students in her PE class because they failed her classroom expectations in Sato and Hodge (2016). One way the students failed the expectations of her classroom was students' lack of response to the assigned questions. Based on the questions Mrs. Conway assigned, "How can we change this game?" and "Adapt it to what we have at home?," one can interpret their lack of response as a manifestation of the language barriers between newcomers and their teachers. The expectations of the teacher need to be amended when facing differences like that of the language barrier.

### **Rejection**

Living and adapting to a new country and culture is difficult, made more difficult by the thought of rejection. Newcomer students can perceive this rejection to be coming from both their peers and teachers and can stem from issues such as discrimination and isolation (Oxman-Martinez & Choi, 2014, Suarez-Orozco et al., 2009). Oxman-Martinez and Choi (2014) conducted a study with a smaller sample size of the original nearly 4,000 newcomers across several Canadian cities. Oxman-Martinez and Choi (2014) focused their study on 515 newcomers' (65% arrived in Canada less than 5 years ago) surveys who were between the ages of 11 and 13 through five questionnaires of the NCCYS answered by the student and what is described as the "person most knowledgeable (PMK)" of the student. This study found that when newcomers perceived themselves to be rejected by their peers or teachers due to discrimination and their statuses - socioeconomic and immigration - they were less likely to create friendships and their academics were negatively affected. Thus, newcomers need the support to integrate socially without the thought of rejection so that the lack of belonging that they may feel can be circumvented.

Another study conducted over five years by Suarez-Orozco et al. (2009) explored the correlation of relationships that newcomers had to their academic engagement and achievement. I will be focusing on the relationships aspect of the study and will discuss the academic engagement and achievement in the following section. Suarez-Orozco et al. (2009) used a mixed method approach using interviews, tests, and questionnaires with newcomers, starting with 407 participants to 309, from 51 schools between the ages of 9 and 14. According to their results, Suarez-Orozco et al. (2009) found that newcomers felt a sense of belonging with those whom they shared cultural or language similarities - conational peers. There was no mention in this study of newcomers having close relationships with native students in their new school or

community. That is, these newcomers had little interaction with their native peers and to ponder on the implications this has on the newcomer students' thoughts of rejection. Did these newcomers fear rejection from their native peers and seek comfort and friendship from their conational peers?

### **External Factors Leading to a Lack of Belonging**

Newcomers face a variety of external factors in their American schools that influence their lack of belonging. External factors are factors that exist outside of an individual's (newcomer) self. These external factors include discrimination, the school environment, and a lack of teacher preparation and awareness.

#### **Discrimination**

Newcomer students are likely to face discrimination in their new American school due to cultural, physical, and language differences. Discrimination can come from both students and the school faculty, including teachers, administration, hall monitors, and other staff (Selimos & Daniel, 2017).

Students facing discrimination can experience negative educational and psychological outcomes, especially if they cannot advocate for themselves or become aware too late that certain behaviors are discriminatory. According to Brown (2015), newcomer and immigrant students that experience greater rates of discrimination are more likely to encounter "lower self-esteem and life satisfaction; a greater likelihood of hopelessness, depression and depressive symptoms; greater anxiety; and more delinquency and aggression" (pp. 8-9). These psychological factors contribute to the growing lack of belonging that newcomers feel (Elia et al., 2022).

Oftentimes, the blatant forms of discrimination, such as derogatory name calling, come from students that are most likely NES and have greater effects on the social aspects of the students' lives (Selimos & Daniel, 2017). A study conducted by Russell and Mantilla-Blanco (2022) consisting of survey and interview data among four high schools in Arizona and New York with diverse populations revealed newcomer students' "experiences of discrimination negatively influenced how students felt that they belonged in school" (p. 636). Russell and Mantilla-Blanco (2022) found that the relationship between the sense of belonging and the treatment newcomers receive from others can have negative and/ or positive correlations. A survey study conducted by Roche and Kuperminc (2012) of 199 Latinx, middle school aged students that were predominantly immigrants found that the stress of discrimination was affecting their sense of belonging. The study found that feelings of stress due to discrimination were negatively correlated with school belonging (Roche & Kuperminc, 2012).

All English learner students are protected "under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI) and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 (EEOA), [stating] public schools must ensure that EL students can participate meaningfully and equally in educational programs" (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2015, p. 1). Teachers and school staff can also impose discrimination either consciously or subconsciously and is linked to negative educational outcomes (Brown, 2015, p. 10). Rodriguez et al. (2020) recounted a situation in which an ESOL teacher inquired about testing a newcomer student for special education services. The ESOL teacher believed "something was going on with him," yet did not consider his circumstances as a newcomer and the possible stressors he faced while adapting to a new country (Rodriguez et al., 2020, p. 188). In this particular instance, the ESOL teacher's assumption of the newcomer's behavior, quiet and distanced Latinx newcomer, can be seen as an example of unconscious

stereotyping with good intentions (Rodriguez et al., 2020, p. 184). Although this ESOL teacher was attempting to support the student, the processes of legitimizing special education services can be detrimental to newcomers and can cause an overrepresentation of English learners in restrictive special education settings (Umansky et al., 2017).

The discussions of Brown (2015), Russell and Mantilla-Blanco (2022), Rodriguez et al. (2020), and Roche and Kuperminc (2012) demonstrate the importance of not tolerating discrimination and racism. Discrimination and racism have negative outcomes, both psychologically and academically, that will hinder newcomers' sense of belonging in American schools and their self-esteem. Working towards the elimination of discrimination will improve newcomer engagement and acculturation in their new community and school.

### **School Environment**

Schools in the United States are essentially considered a safe environment. They are used as shelters in case of emergencies (NYS Department of Education, 2010) and are sources for community information (Port Chester School District, 2017). As newcomers and their families start their transition into their new communities, schools provide information and security (Port Chester School District, 2017; NYC Public Schools, 2024). Allen et al. (2018) argued that a student's sense of safety and security was related to how fair a school's policies and structure are, and that the physical environment also contributed to this feeling. Newcomers are not familiar with the operations of a school in the U.S. and the notion of a student handbook can seem foreign and unnecessary to them (Szylk et al., 2020). If a student attending a U.S. school has not learned English and is given a student handbook, usually completely in English, they can experience a feeling of detachment from their peers and the staff as they may be unable to understand the meaning of the item or its contents on their own.

Allen et al. (2018) conducted a study that examined 51 other studies documented from 1993 to 2013 with over 67,000 participants ranging from 12 to 18 years old related to school belongingness. The studies examined were from public, private religious, and private non-religious schools in the U.S., Australia and New Zealand (Allen et al., 2018). One of the findings of this study was that when students perceived their school environment to be safe, it positively correlated to a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2018). Similarly, McInerney (2023) conducted a study using survey and interview data of 391 newcomer students between the ages of 14 and 22 to assess the factors that contribute to a sense of belonging. Through student interviews, McInerney (2023), found that physical safety and security were discussed by most students and feeling emotionally, linguistically, and physically safe in their environment formed feelings of belongings. In a safe environment students were more motivated because they were not scared of making mistakes or sharing their feelings while being away from danger (McInerney, 2023).

Another study by Matejko et al., (2024) sampled 4 students as representatives of newcomers in a Canadian high school that used artwork, interviews, and focus groups for these students to describe their experiences in their new school. A student from this study, Nasim, recounted her experience with technology in the classroom, “I didn’t have a phone, so I was just there struggling, looking for a textbook, but they didn’t have the textbooks for it” emphasizing the challenges she faced because she did not have access to the same technology and the classroom and school lacked the variety of sources for the material (Matejko et al., 2024, p. 590). This situation highlights the disparity that newcomers and native students and staff have between themselves when it comes to school resources and socioeconomic needs. This particular school may be investing in more digital technology but has disregarded the access to that technology



that their newcomer students may or may not have, further instilling a mindset in newcomer students that they do not belong in their new school.

The school staff and administration are part of the school environment and can either help or hinder a newcomer's experience. The 4 students from Matejko et al's (2024) study also expressed their lack of trust toward authority figures due to the lack of diversity among school staff and administration. Another student, Catalina, pointed out that the only professionals she encountered in the school were white and privileged, which made it more difficult for Catalina to connect with them (Matejko et al., 2024).

### **Lack of Teacher Preparation/Awareness**

Newcomers may be placed in classes where they can encounter teachers that lack preparation and awareness on how to effectively instruct them. This lack includes prepared lessons, methods of communication, situational awareness, and knowledge of laws and policies that can inhibit newcomers' educational and personal well-being. Yough et al. (2021) conducted a study with the use of a set of data from the Educational Longitudinal Study 2002 (ELS: 2002) that consisted of 16,000 tenth grade students from 750 schools around the nation to survey student perceptions of the school climate. A finding of this study is in supportive climates created by teachers, "students are likely to experience positive affect and utilize effective self-regulatory behaviors including goal setting and taking action" (Yough et al., 2024, p. 144). This finding is crucial because supportive environments need to be created by the teacher and without the right amount of preparation and awareness, the classroom may only be supportive to a certain demographic of students, rather than all. As the newcomer student population rises (Russell et al., 2021), this lack of preparation becomes more evident of the distance between the newcomers and their teachers reinforcing a lack of belonging that newcomers can feel.

In Rodriguez et al.'s (2020) study, teachers noted generalizations such as, immigration laws and insufficient resources as obstacles faced by newcomer students. In South Carolina, the location of the study, Law HB 4400 prohibits newcomers from being able to pursue a postsecondary education at the state's public colleges and universities and from obtaining educational advantages, such as scholarships, grants and in-state tuition (Rodriguez et al., 2020). The problem with teachers being vague in their responses regarding law and policy on newcomers and immigrant children is that teachers are not able to truly grasp the challenges newcomers may undergo in their educational careers.

Villegas et al. (2018) reviewed 21 empirical studies from the years 2000-2016 on the preparation of pre-service general education teachers and their knowledge of teaching ELL students. Findings revealed that only eight studies reported pre-service teachers receiving educational courses on strategies to teach ELLs. The other 13 studies reported pre-service teachers felt educated on the perspectives and their beliefs of ELL students. Likewise, an online survey study of 444 in-service teachers in Arizona schools with high populations of ELL students, conducted by Okhremtchouk and Sellu (2019), found that more than half of those teachers had little to no exposure of ELL students during their pre-service training. However, while in-service, 95% of the same teachers had high exposure to ELL students. The lack of exposure during their pre-service training and education was not an effective preparation. Although these teachers reported being knowledgeable on cultural awareness, they scored the lowest on second language acquisition and assessment and evaluation of English language proficiency. These teachers can be culturally aware and embrace diversity in their classrooms, but they lack the education on how to incorporate it into their instruction and assessments. Despite challenging one's perspective and beliefs on ELL students being an integral part of

teacher education, teacher candidates still believed it was not their responsibility to be a teacher of ELLs (Villegas et al., 2018). The findings of these studies demonstrate the lack of preparation to teach all levels of ELLs during coursework and pre-service opportunities. The observation made by Rodriguez et al. (2020) was that “teachers are not sufficiently trained to engage in equitable practices [...] as products of their teacher education context, which is often through state institutions that adhere to [...] anti-immigration politics” (p. 182).

Similarly, another study conducted by Kolano et al. (2013) gathered 157 surveys across North and South Carolina from mainstream teachers involved in an ESL extension program to better understand the perceived effectiveness of teacher preparation programs and professional development related to English language learners. This study revealed the lack of diversity training that many of the participants experienced during teacher training programs (Kolano et al., 2013). This lack of training does not allow teachers to incorporate diverse content into their instruction and interactions with students and families. Without proper training, the teacher may be insensitive or not know the strategies that will lead their newcomer students to success. While in-service, many participants also reported attending less than two conferences of ELL education (Kolano et al., 2013). It is crucial for teachers to receive training throughout the school year to be better equipped to teach their population of ELLs. Teachers need to collect data regarding their ELL students and explore possible instructional strategies that will work for their specific students. Without training throughout the year, teachers do not have the opportunity to learn from their colleagues or listen to new research regarding ELLs.

### **The Effects of Internal and External Factors**

A newcomer’s sense of belonging can affect their second language acquisition (SLA) (Penner et al., 2021). The research done on the factors discussed above adds to this correlation;

the more a newcomer feels they belong in their new school, improvements in their SLA will rise with it (McInerney, 2023). If we were to analyze this as a chain reaction, we could see how each affects the other: sense of belonging → SLA → sense of belonging.

Second language acquisition will be delved into more deeply in the following section. The SLA section will examine how the internal factors of newcomers affect their second language acquisition. Swain's Output Hypothesis of producing language will be analyzed through the same lens of the newcomers' sense of belonging.

### **Second Language Acquisition**

A newcomer's second language acquisition is affected by many factors that influence their sense of belonging. Araceli, from Matejko et al.'s (2024) study, felt that her new school did not help her to improve her English proficiencies, instead she felt the services only focused on evaluating her English proficiency. Araceli stated, "I don't remember any people coming into class and try[ing] to teach me English. I don't remember that, any English I learned was by myself or like in class but that was like with the rest of the students" which shows how the school did not uplift her sense of belonging because they did not have anyone helping her with English. This statement from Araceli can also lead the audience to assume that the teacher lacked the preparation to teach students like Araceli. The lack of teacher preparation affects second language acquisition since teachers are not adequately educated on strategies that will ease newcomers into their new school and teaching them English through content (Okhremtchouk & Sellu, 2019).

From their study of focus groups and interviews with newcomers aged 16 through 22, Selimos and Daniel (2017) found that their lack of language skills was correlated to their lack of confidence in their communication skills. The students interviewed discussed feeling intimidated

and embarrassed to engage in conversation with their native-born Canadian peers (Selimos & Daniel, 2017). Their second language acquisition is being affected by their feelings of embarrassment because they are not taking the opportunity to use the output skills. Swain (2005) has focused on the importance of producing language meaningful in order for students to acquire their second language. If students are feeling intimidated to speak in the L2 in conversational settings, then the school and teachers have not done enough to reduce those feelings through school initiatives and the students' L2 development is suffering.

Penner et al. (2021) conducted a study in Canada with 35 students aged 18 to 24 through interviews and focus groups that found that sense of belonging had an impact on their second language learning. Students whose L1 was English would not speak in their L1 to other peers due to “linguistic insecurit[ies]” that followed them outside of their classrooms (p. 33-34). Professors were also seen as contributors to this insecurity when errors were made linguistically and because of accents (Penner et al., 2021). Hennebry-Leung and Lamb (2024) studied the motivation of language learning using various other studies of school-aged students. The reported attitudes of these professors from Penner et al. (2021) contrast with Hennebry-Leung and Lamb (2024) whose data reinforced that classrooms needed to be safe spaces where mistakes and errors were to be learned from.

Each of these examples illustrate that sense of belonging affects the output of the L2. Swain's Output Hypothesis is facilitated by supported activities and environments. Newcomers need to feel that they belong and that they have support in their new communities to progress in their SLA and experience a better transition.

### **Strategies Used to Increase Sense of Belonging**

Newcomer students transitioning into a new school and community often lack the sense of belonging necessary to motivate students to be successful academically, emotionally, and socially. Educators have employed strategies to build a sense of belonging within newcomers through classroom activities and promoting extracurriculars such as sports teams and clubs.

### **Sport Teams and Clubs**

Sport teams and clubs are excellent strategies to increase the sense of belonging within students. Russell and Mantilla-Blanco (2022) found students were able to create diverse friendships with students of other races once participating on a sports team. According to Russell and Mantilla-Blanco (2022), newcomers that joined clubs, such as the LGBTQ+ club, described it as being a friendly environment where they felt safe to share their experiences. Similarly, Elia et al.'s (2022) qualitative study, found promoting sports teams to struggling students boosted connectedness through new friendships which also increased their academic success. After living in Arizona for four years, a student, Ali, recounted that his experience with joining a soccer team had a very positive impact on his sense of belonging stating, "Playing with people that I know, like soccer. I had more friends here . . . I hang out with a lot of people, just like Mexican [students], white people. [My group of friends is] just like mixed" according to student interviews by Russell and Mantilla-Blanco (2022) (p. 634). Likewise, Selimos and Daniel (2017) found participants in their studies made friends more easily with native born Canadian students through the participation of extracurriculars and sports teams. The newcomers found a common interest with their peers and formed long-term friendships, increasing their sense of belonging.

The Port Chester Middle School has established a newcomer students club called "Bienvenidos" run by one of the school's counselors. This club is similar to a support group in which they have discussions and do different activities each week in order for newcomer

students to acculturate into their new community and school. Some weeks the club focuses on the traditions, culture, social norms, and holidays practiced in the United States. Other weeks, the discussion and activities are dedicated to explaining feelings, teaching coping skills, and fostering the relationships that newcomer students experience with both their peers and teachers.

Port Chester Middle School enrolls newcomers throughout the year and they are encouraged to join Bienvenidos by their teachers and counselors. Newcomers join and attend the club regularly, however they are hesitant at first. After students share their personal experiences and complete activities, then they begin to make connections with others who have similar experiences. During this club, the newcomers do not interact with non-newcomer students since the club curriculum does not call for it, yet they do interact with former newcomer students. These former newcomer students choose to return to the group for their enjoyment and to mentor the current newcomers.

### **Classroom Activities**

Classroom activities such as meaningful learning experiences and class discussions also create a sense of belonging within students. In a classroom where students learned about political and societal issues, and were encouraged to share their opinions on such matters, they tended to feel more respected by their peers and teachers than those who did not (Russell & Mantilla-Blanco, 2022). Strategies to improve the feeling of belonging in newcomer students are crucial to their academic, social, and emotional success as it may lower mental health issues and risky behaviors often developed due to the lack of belonging.

As newcomers continue to integrate into our schools, educators need more strategies to implement that will ease the transition and increase the sense of belonging of these students into their new schools. The two strategies mentioned above - sports teams/clubs and classroom

activities - are an important piece to the acculturation of newcomers. By providing more professional development and training opportunities to teachers, like the one I am proposing in Chapter 3, before and throughout the school year to support teachers in educating their ELL population, especially newcomers. It is evident, from the research, that teachers lack the preparation needed to teach a growing diverse population, so it is beneficial for teachers and students that there are more opportunities for continued learning of ELL education. In the next chapter, I will be discussing the professional development project that I have created to assist educators in supporting the transition of their newcomer ELL students. This professional development project was produced using the research as evidence to educate and enhance the current strategies that are being implemented by teachers across the Port Chester School District.



### **Chapter 3: Professional Development and Tools**

In this Chapter, I will present a professional development presentation and tools that can be used by teachers struggling to build a sense of belonging within their English language learner (ELL) population. Research suggests having a sense of belonging eases the transition that newcomers experience when coming to American school (e.g., Russell & Mantilla-Blanco, 2022; Selimos & Daniel, 2017). However, while working at Port Chester Middle School in the Port Chester School District, I have encountered many teachers who have expressed concerns related to the transition of ELL newcomers in our school (personal communication, June 4, 2024).

This Chapter describes a professional development (PD) designed for all educators K-12 of ELL newcomers. The plan includes several steps: a video presentation, an explanation of the issue, an open discussion between the presenter and the attendees, an overview of relevant materials and tools, and time for practice and analysis. The final steps involve creating a plan for ELLs and conducting post-interviews with both the student and their parents/guardians, either separately or together. Below I describe when and where the professional development will take place, the video presentation, a welcome packet sample, the family survey, conducting a home interview, creating a plan after the survey and interview, and the post-interview.

#### **Description of the Professional Development**

The professional development presentation will take place on the first two days back to school for staff only, August 28th and 29th, 2024. These days are reserved for Superintendent Conference Days and as PD days. All teachers K-12 from across the district will be asked to meet in the Port Chester Middle School Auditorium on both days for two 1.5 hour sessions. This location has been selected because it is the biggest space in the district for teachers to

congregate, as well as having an air conditioner. The sessions will take place after lunch-time from 1:15pm to 2:45pm.

The professional development will be presented by myself using a Google Slides presentation (see Appendix A). The presentation will include the materials, tools, and documents (see Appendices B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I) that will be given to teachers throughout the presentation as essential components to their development and plan. This PD will include 6 parts after an icebreaker activity. The first part will be an activity in which teachers will watch a video (Appendix B) that sounds like English, but is not with some discussion questions. The second part is introducing the problem we will be examining and an activity (Appendix C) that will have teachers share their experience with the problem and solutions they have used. The third part is reviewing the materials that I have created and will provide, such as a welcome packet sample (Appendix D), family survey (Appendix E), home interview (Appendix F), a planning sheet (Appendix G), and check-in questionnaire (Appendix H) to help address the issue. Then the teachers will have time to review case studies associated with ELL students and come up with a plan to support them. Finally, the teachers will share their plans with the audience and I will have a closing activity for feedback.

### **Icebreaker Activity**

To start off the professional development presentation, I will welcome all K-12 teachers and ask them to find a seat next to another person. I will introduce myself and thank everyone for being on time and participating in this PD. As an icebreaker, I will ask the teachers to introduce themselves in their ELL students' native language to the person they are sitting next to. They will say their name, what school and grade level they teach, and how many years they have been teaching. If they do not know the native language, they can introduce themselves using a

greeting they may teach to their ELL students. The icebreaker will get the teachers talking and familiarize themselves with each other since they will be having discussions during other parts of the professional development. After about three minutes, I will stop the introductions and introduce myself again, but in Spanish as a model. I will then ask for a few volunteers to introduce themselves to the audience either in their ELL's native language or English.

### **Video Presentation**

I will begin by welcoming in the K-12 teachers and then play a video for them (Appendix B). The video is of a phone conversation in which both parties are clearly heard. The men in the video are speaking a fake version of English that is not comprehensible to a native English speaker. Before playing the video, I will ask the teachers to identify the language being used, and listen for words that sound similar to English while the video is being played. At the end of the video, I will ask the participants about how they felt while watching the video and listening to the conversation. After receiving responses, I will continue to discuss the video and its purpose further connecting the feelings felt by those who answered with those a newcomer would be feeling. The reason for this activity is to familiarize teachers with the same experiences and feelings beginner ELLs may have in their classroom.

### **An Overview of the Problem and an Open Discussion**

After the video presentation, I will have an overview of the problem, which is easing the transition of newcomer students by building a sense of belonging within them. I will begin by acknowledging the struggles of newcomers, both internal (IF) and external (EF) effects. Next, I will discuss the effects of the IFs and EFs on newcomers' sense of belonging. After reviewing the effects, the participants will complete an activity in which they identify a problem that they have faced teaching newcomers and a solution that has worked for them, using Canva

Whiteboard (Appendix C), an interactive sticky note sharing. Finally, I will examine current strategies that are used to increase newcomers' sense of belonging. Once I have completed my overview, I will then go into the materials and tools I have created that will aid in assisting newcomers' transition into their new school.

### **Welcome Packet Sample**

Newcomer students will be given a Welcome Packet (see Appendix D) that will introduce them to Port Chester Middle School in an informal way and will be provided in both English and the student's home language. It will become an opportunity for these students to learn about their new school and community before beginning classes. The sample (Appendix D) attached illustrates the information that will be given to them - a teacher blurb, testimonials from current students, clubs and sports available to them, places to visit around Port Chester, and peer introductions from students who volunteer to be school pen pals through their emails.

### **Family Survey**

A family survey (see Appendix E) is an effective way to get to know student families. For newcomers, a survey will reveal vital information regarding languages used, previous education, and interests that will help the teacher plan instruction. A family survey is also a productive way of getting to know students (Breiseth et al., 2011). Newcomers can arrive at any time during the year, so if a child starts mid-year the teacher has already made connections with her other students. It can be intimidating walking into a classroom that one knows nothing about; however, a survey will show the student that the teacher cares about getting to know them. The feeling of being cared for is crucial to the success of newcomer ELLs; it increases their sense of belonging and academic success (Russell & Mantilla-Blanco, 2022; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2009).

The attached survey is a Google Form (Appendix E) that will be sent to families to be completed together as there are questions for both the students and the adults, including but not limited to educational background, language use, English language proficiency, interests, family traditions, and preferred communication. The advantage of doing it through Google Forms is being able to switch the language of the survey. If parents do not have access to the survey digitally, it would be best for the teacher to ask for their home language and send a paper version in the home language.

### **Home Interview**

Home interviews enable teachers and parents to build a strong relationship with open lines of communication. It is another way for teachers to connect with their families and encourage more parental involvement (Stetson et al., 2012). Newcomers need support from their school, but especially from their families. When their families are more involved, improvements in the child's learning and behaviors are observable over time (Stetson et al., 2012).

A home interview (Appendix F) is being used as a way to learn more about newcomer families and their current situation. The home interview is to be conducted after the teacher receives the family survey and can create questions based on the survey. To conduct a home interview, the teacher must contact the family to schedule the best day and time for the interview. When communicating with the family regarding the home interview, the teacher must emphasize that the family is not in trouble and it is to get to know them and be a support system for them. Many newcomer families do not yet understand the American school system and may not be familiar with home interviews. The teacher will also need 1-2 more school faculty members to conduct the home interview, for safety and communication reasons - the best case scenario would be for the school's social worker or community coordinator to participate in the interview.

If the teacher is not fluent in the family's home language, it is crucial to involve another faculty member that can communicate with the family, or a translator. A school psychologist or counselor is also recommended to attend to learn more about the family and be another line of support for the family. During the home interview, all school faculty members must remain sensitive to the family's responses and situations.

### **Planning Sheet**

The planning sheet (Appendix G) is a tool for teachers to use after the home interview. Once the teachers and school faculty members have gathered their information, they will meet to formulate a plan for the student. There are four sections to fill out on the planning sheet: student's interests and ways to incorporate them into instruction, instructional strategies/activities that will support the student based on their interests and English language proficiency, club and sport team recommendations for the student to join, and short/long term goals for the student. This planning sheet is useful to guide the teacher and the student to their next steps. With the new information and the planning sheet, the teacher will have an open conversation with the student about what the teacher has planned. If the student agrees, they will move forward with implementing that plan, but if the student requests something, the teacher will be open and willing to accommodate the request(s).

### **Check-in Questionnaire**

The check-in questionnaire (Appendix H) is student focused and will be utilized by the teacher after the student has been attending school for 4 weeks. The questionnaire will be given to the student to be completed by themselves. These questions are meant to learn about the newcomers' experiences and feelings regarding their new school. Some of the questions included pertain to friendships, extracurriculars, bullying, feelings about the school, and their goals. The

teacher will use this questionnaire to support the student academically, socially, and emotionally. The questionnaire will also reveal how well the student is acclimating to the school which will inform the teacher more on possible ways .

### **Case Study Activity**

After reviewing all of the materials (Appendices C, D, E, F, G, H), I will review 2 case studies: Newcomer A and Newcomer B. In groups of two to four, they will choose one of the studies and write a plan for the student using the Planning Sheet (Appendix G). The groups will be given 10 minutes to create a plan and post it into Padlet (Appendix I). After 10 minutes, the groups will choose one person to share their plan with the audience. The audience will be encouraged to provide feedback to their plans using Padlet or sharing aloud.

### **Recap and Closing Activity**

I will summarize the main points of this professional development which will lead to the closing activity. The closing activity will be an interactive Q&A. The participants will be given an index card to write a question based on the PD. The cards will then be collected and passed out randomly. In groups of three to five, the groups will discuss and answer the questions together. After 10 minutes, I will use 5 minutes to have volunteers share a question and answer with the others.

### **Chapter 4: Conclusion**

With the rising number of newcomers, the purpose of this research was to identify the ways in which newcomers' transition into a new school is affected. The transition of newcomers was the focus as many of these students will struggle without the support. Due to school staff and students, many factors will impact the transition into a new school including discrimination, being unsure of school expectation, the lack of teacher preparation, and the school environment which lead to students feeling a lack of belonging (Elia et al., 2022; Russell & Mantilla-Blanco, 2022). Along with a lack of belonging, newcomers' second language acquisition is affected by those factors. There are several strategies that can be employed to help students achieve English proficiency skills and increase their sense of belonging. Newcomer students are encouraged to join sport teams and clubs, as well as utilizing classroom activities that will assist in their transition. To gain a better understanding of newcomers' transition, many questions were developed during my research including: (1) What factors contribute to newcomers struggling with adapting to the U.S./ English speaking schools?, (2) What makes educating newcomers challenging?, (3) What solutions have already been implemented? and (4) What solutions can I use and improve upon in my own class, school, and community?

These few questions have led me to create my final research question: How can educators effectively support newcomer students, or newcomers, in adapting to U.S./ English-speaking schools? In the following section, I discuss some conclusions from the research that answer the research question. The first conclusion drawn from the research is that teachers of newcomer and ELL students are unsure of their school expectations (Hos et al., 2019; Kolano et al., 2013; Sato & Hodge, 2016; Syzlk et al., 2020). Teachers that are unfamiliar with newcomer students may



often have the same expectations for their newcomer ELLs as they have for their native English speakers, however they must make adjustments.

Teachers should have high expectations for their ELL students, but they cannot expect them to meet those expectations right away. It takes work from both the teacher and the student through relationship building to discern how to get the student to meet those expectations (Hos et al., 2019; Sato & Hodge, 2016). Newcomer students are also unfamiliar with school norms and policies (Elia et al., 2022) due to their vast cultural differences (Kolano et al., 2013). Many newcomer students come from countries that do not have the same educational policies and standards as the U.S., so it is crucial that these students are explicitly taught these expectations because their academic success is at stake (Sato & Hodge, 2016). For educators and newcomers to be successful in the same environment, they need to be explicitly taught.

Another conclusion based on the research is the lack of teacher preparation to teach ELL students (Kolano et al., 2013; Okhremtchouk & Sellu, 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2020; Villegas et al., 2018; Yough et al., 2024). From the literature review, teachers have expressed how little training and professional development they have received for diverse students. Teachers are frustrated not that they have students with diverse needs in their class, but that they are not prepared for it. Teacher preparation programs often lack the courses and experiences that are necessary for future educators to be well-versed to teach ELL students of all proficiency levels (Kolano et al., 2013; Okhremtchouk & Sellu, 2019). Today, newcomers and ELLs are a huge part of school populations, so it is no longer acceptable for colleges and teacher preparation programs to not offer courses and relevant experiences that will better equip future educators to teach students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Finally, research has highlighted the importance of utilizing sport teams and clubs to boost a sense of belonging within newcomer students (Elia et al., 2022; Russell & Mantilla-Blanco, 2022; Selimos & Daniel, 2017). It can be difficult for newcomers to make friends due to their cultural and linguistic differences compared to their native English-speaking peers. Friendships can greatly impact a student's sense of belonging and a great way of building newcomers' sense of belonging is through encouraging them to join sports and clubs. Many newcomer students have expressed the difference of joining a sport or club as made on their experience in their new school (Elia et al., 2022; Russell & Mantilla-Blanco, 2022; Selimos & Daniel, 2017). These students were able to make friends quickly, regardless of their cultural background, and have conversations with their peers. Joining sports and clubs also supports their second language acquisition in an environment they are comfortable in because newcomer students need to communicate with their coaches and teammates. These skills can be transferable to the classroom further supporting students in their transition and acquiring English.

### **Implications for Student Learning and Teaching**

This PD is a helpful addition to the way that newcomer ELLs will be able to learn material and find their place among the school community. Newcomer ELLs, as they go through the process proposed by the PD, are giving information that will guide their learning and experiences in an unfamiliar school. The family survey, interview, and check-in survey (see Appendices E, F, & H) give glimpses to newcomers of what to expect and teachers of where to steer their lessons for these students. It will also allow teachers to gain a better understanding of their incoming newcomer students. Additionally, teachers are given the opportunity to learn about the newcomer and their family before the student enters the classroom. They can learn about these students' lives and former school experiences and apply that to their teaching and

interactions. The ability to accommodate lessons for newcomers becomes easier with the information they receive. Planning and collaborating with the other interviewer(s) creates a dynamic that allows multiple perspectives to contribute the most effective strategies to assist with the student's learning.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The proposed professional development is in its earliest stages of conception. In these beginning stages, the need for more comprehensive data on transitioning newcomers becomes apparent. A large portion of the available literature focuses on recounted experiences of newcomers from any number of months to years ago. This PD will serve as a stepping-stone in collecting that primary data in real time. However, to properly document and analyze the efficacy of this PD, there will need to be more check-in surveys tailored to the newcomer experience as time goes on. Check-in surveys can be given every 2 months during the first year of their transition; and after that first year, surveys can be given every 3 to 4 months. In addition to the continuing surveys, meetings between the student and the initial interviewers can be held for more open discussion at established times. These meetings can be with 1 newcomer student or a group of 5 or less for more dialog.

The PD itself requires follow-ups and to extend to all school staff. There are non-instructional employees at a school such as teacher aides, hall monitors and custodial staff. These school employees may not have access to, or are not given, information on newcomer students. An accompanying PD on awareness of newcomer students and the sensitivity needed to traverse the relationships these students are building among themselves, and their new school is necessary.

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**Appendix A**

**Canva Presentation Link with VoiceThread Recording**

**[PD Recording](#)**

**Appendix B**

**Video Presentation Link:**

[YouTube Video](#)

**Appendix C**

**Canva Whiteboard Activity**

**[Canva Sticky Notes](#)**

**Appendix D**

**Welcome Packet Sample**

 **NEWCOMER WELCOME PACKET**

**Appendix E**

**Family Survey using Google Forms**

<https://forms.gle/ZxfArUTWgmPzCghK8>

**Appendix F**

**Home Interview Information Sheet**

** Home Visit Information Sheet**

**Appendix G**

**Planning Sheet**

** Post-Home Interview Planning Sheet**

**Appendix H**

**Check - In Questionnaire**

<https://forms.gle/8thRqZwRPhZOJU3G8>



**Appendix I**

**Padlet**

**[Padlet Activity Link](#)**