

# The Differential Experience and Educational Outcomes Among Two Cohorts of English Language Learning Students

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*This study examined the differential experience and educational outcomes among two English Language Learning (ELL) student cohorts, namely holders of a high school diploma and individuals who did not complete high school. Our analysis of 39 interviews with ELL respondents demonstrated that premigration experience; personal qualities; interactions at home, in school, and in the community; as well as peer influence, have shaped the differing experience and inequitable educational outcomes of ELL students. The findings brought attention to the areas of support for all ELL students, including quality classroom instruction, explicit and structured ELL education, supplementary academic and literacy programs, responsive psychosocial support, and access to positive mentors.*

*Cette étude a examiné les différentes expériences et résultats scolaires de deux cohortes d'étudiants apprenant l'anglais (ELL), à savoir les titulaires d'un diplôme d'études secondaires et les personnes qui n'ont pas terminé leurs études secondaires. Notre analyse de 39 entretiens avec des répondants ELL a démontré que l'expérience antérieure à la migration, les qualités personnelles, les interactions à la maison, à l'école et dans la communauté, ainsi que l'influence des pairs, ont façonné l'expérience différente et les résultats scolaires inéquitables des étudiants ELL. Les résultats ont attiré l'attention sur les domaines de soutien pour tous les étudiants ELL, notamment un enseignement de qualité en classe, une éducation ELL explicite et structurée, des programmes académiques et d'alphabétisation supplémentaires, un soutien psychosocial adapté et l'accès à des mentors positifs.*

Across Canada, young people who arrived from non-English speaking countries or were born into immigrant families with non-English home languages have drastically changed the sociodemographic landscape in K–12 school jurisdictions. School districts and educational policies have identified them as English Language Learners (ELL). In Alberta, where this study took place, the identified ELL population increased 587% from 17,200 in the 1998–1999 school year to 118,194 in the 2017–2018 school year (Alberta Education, personal communication, October 21, 2019; Howard Research & Management Consulting Inc, 2006). Over the same period, the general population of students increased by about 25% from 574,628 to 719,889 students (Alberta Education, 2017, 2020). Contemporary scholarship has shown mixed educational outcomes among ELL students and pointed to the need for a nuanced understanding of the experience of ELL students and for developing differential, responsive responses to their needs (Hou & Zhang, 2015; Ngo, 2012; Toohey & Derwing, 2008). This article extends the body of

knowledge about youth from immigrant backgrounds by examining the experience and educational outcomes among two ELL cohorts, namely holders of a high school diploma and individuals who did not complete high school.

## **Background**

The existing scholarship has primarily relied on aggregate data to examine school performance among ELL students in Canada and to compare their educational achievements with those from the general school population. In the analysis of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), administered to a sample of 15-year-olds in 2018, O'Grady et al. (2019) showed that Canadian students of immigrant backgrounds, overall, performed as well as non-immigrant students on the reading assessment. They, however, pointed out that foreign-born students were outperformed by their non-immigrant and second-generation immigrant peers (those born into families with foreign-born parents), and that second-generation immigrant students had significantly higher average reading scores compared to non-immigrant students. Their analysis also indicated that students who spoke a language at home other than English or French had lower achievement in reading compared to those who spoke either of the two official languages at home. Previous analyses of PISA data showed that foreign-born students tend to have average math scores similar to those of Canadian-born students, and that as the number of years that a foreign-born student lives in Canada increases, the closer their average score in reading is to the average scores of Canadian-born students (Hou & Zhang, 2015; McMullen, 2004). These findings were consistent with the assertion that even though children of immigrants whose first language was neither English nor French were at a disadvantage in the early years at school in reading and writing, their performance converged with the performance of the children of Canadian-born parents who had spent more years in the Canadian school system (Dinovitzer et al., 2003; Worswick, 2001).

Another aspect of ELL students' educational experience that has received considerable attention is their high school completion rates. In an analysis of the 2011 National Household Survey data, Hou and Zhang (2015) found that young people aged 20 to 24 who arrived in Canada before the age of 15 were more likely to have a high school diploma (93.1%) than their Canadian-born counterparts (86.6%). Earlier analyses of macro-level data also indicated similar favourable high school completion rates among learners of immigrant backgrounds (Abada et al., 2008; Reitz et al., 2011). Roessingh and Douglas (2012a) cautioned that analyses of macro-level data in the form of graduation rates have failed to capture the precision of and refined insights into ELL learners' educational experience, and often lead to misguided conclusions about their educational success. They contended that such analyses might mask the reality of the educational outcomes of ELLs upon completion of high school and the challenges they face in making the transition from high school to university (Roessingh & Douglas, 2012b). Indeed, several school- or district-specific studies documented high school dropout rates among ELL learners to be between 40% and 74% (Derwing et al., 1999; Toohey & Derwing, 2008; Watt & Roessingh, 2001). These reported rates were significantly higher than the high school non-completion rate among young Canadians, which is about 14% (Uppal, 2017). Qualitative accounts also elaborated on the various school challenges that have contributed to poor educational experiences and outcomes among youth of immigrant backgrounds, including a lack of English proficiency, strained relationships with school personnel and peers, and a lack of support during school transitions (Ngo et al., 2017; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009).

Furthermore, the educational outcomes of students with immigrant backgrounds are often characterized by significant regional differences, which may result from multiple factors, including immigrant selection programs and settlement policies (Hou & Zhang, 2015). In Alberta, successive funding cuts have eroded access of ELL learners to quality English language instruction and culturally responsive support. In the early 1990s, the Alberta government undertook deep cuts to education, resulting in an 80% reduction in English language instruction programs (Lopes & Thomas, 2006). Since then, critics have continued to voice their concerns that English language learning programs are “poorly funded, deserved and haphazardly administered” (Di Cintio, 2015, p. 29). The mantra, *all teachers are ELL teachers*, has often been used to mask a lack of explicit English language learning instruction (Di Cintio, 2015). A subsuming approach to supporting ELL learners has been manifested in policy responses. For example, although Alberta Education (2021) acknowledges that school leaving is a process that begins long before a student reaches high school and highlights addiction, work, social alienation, teenage pregnancy, and mental health as the primary reasons, the department has not addressed school leaving among ELL students.

This study, therefore, responded to the need for a holistic, contextualized, and nuanced understanding of ELL students’ educational experiences. Centering on participants’ voices, it offers an insider perspective on the lived experience of immigration, settlement, and education integration among ELL students.

### **Theoretical Grounding**

This study was grounded in the ecological perspective, which views human development in complex webs of interactions between individuals and various systems. Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified four types of ecological environments influencing human development: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. In the microsystem, individuals develop in their immediate environment and interact with immediate stakeholders such as family members and peers. The mesosystem involves interactions between individuals and those stakeholders representing institutions, such as teachers or police officers. In the exosystem, individuals interact with formal and informal social structures that do not directly impose on them but influence their development (e.g., mass media, the neighbourhood). Finally, the macrosystem encompasses the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, legal, and political systems which manifest attitudes and ideologies and shape patterns of social interactions among individuals. A critical examination of how individuals function and interact with others in these systems would offer a holistic, ecological understanding of their life experiences.

Previous scholarship on ELL students in Canada, as elaborated in the previous section, has primarily focused on individual capacities (such as reading and writing), acquisition of English language proficiency, and high school completion (see Hou & Zhang, 2015; O’Grady et al., 2019; Toohey & Derwing, 2008; Watt & Roessingh, 2001). A number of studies have, at varying levels, examined ELL students’ interactions with their families and peers (microsystem) and with people in their neighbourhood (mesosystem), as well as the impact of educational and social policy responses on their access to educational and social services and support (macrosystem) (see Di Cintio, 2015; Ngo et al., 2017; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). Although the existing literature has generated theoretical and practical knowledge, holistic and contextualized understanding of ELL learners’ educational experiences and outcomes is needed.

Throughout the research process, the ecological perspective informed the substantive focus of the inquiry questions, data gathering, and analysis. Our study attended to participants' experiences at home, in school, and in the community before and after their arrival in Canada. It situated learning in the interrelations of individuals, institutions, programs, and ideas (Valencia et al., 2009); examined the historical, social, political, and material contexts in which teaching and learning occur (Shin & Seger, 2016; van Lier, 2003); and attended to formally organized and informal processes that promote individual and collective wellbeing (Garcia-Reid et al., 2005).

## **Method**

This study used grounded theory, an inductive methodology, to systematically gather and analyze interview data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Following the research protocol approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board, the research team conducted individual interviews with research participants who met these criteria: (a) Between 16 and 30 years of age; (b) Have been identified as students with English as an additional language during their K–12 education; (c) Have completed a high school diploma, have dropped out or have been pushed out of high school; (d) Have attended a K–12 public school in Alberta for at least six months; and (e) Have parental consent (or legal guardian's consent) to participate in the study if under 18 years of age. Using convenience and snowball sampling strategies, the research team recruited prospective participants through public notices, social media, service and community organizations, and word of mouth. We conducted interviews at various sites, including the offices of service partners and participants' homes. The audio-recorded interviews lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours. They were then transcribed manually for data analysis. Guided by constructivist grounded theory, data analysis began as soon as the first interview was completed and involved constant comparison to conceptualize, categorize, and establish relationships among theoretical concepts (Charmaz, 2014). The analytic process involved open coding, axial coding and selective coding, which helped identify concepts and their properties, discover relationships among sub-categories and categories, and determine the emerging storyline (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Table 1 provides an overview of the research participants. A total of 39 individuals took part in the study. The cohort of ELL students with a high school diploma consisted of 17 respondents with almost equal gender distribution, a disproportionate number of foreign-born individuals, and a diversity of ethnic origins. On the other hand, the cohort of ELL participants who did not complete high school consisted of 22 individuals, with a disproportionate representation of males, foreign-born individuals, and those of African descent. High school non-completion status was assigned to those who dropped out of high school on their own (four respondents), were expelled from high school due to their behaviour (seven respondents), or were pushed out of high school as they had exceeded the age restriction for high school students in Alberta (11 respondents).

## **Findings**

Our analysis of the transcripts of the 39 interviews with participants brought into focus the experiences of the two distinct cohorts of ELL learners, namely holders of a high school diploma (N = 17) and individuals who did not complete high school (N = 22). The findings demonstrated that premigration experience; personal qualities; interactions at home, in school, and the community; as well as peer influence, have shaped the differing experience and inequitable educational outcomes of ELL students.

Table 1

*An Overview of Respondents*

	Respondents with a High School Diploma	Respondents Not Completing High School
Total	17	22
Gender		
Male	8	20
Female	9	2
ELL Codes		
Canadian-born	3	3
Foreign-born	14	19
Ethnicity		
Latin American and Caribbean	4	4
African	3	10
Middle Eastern	-	4
South Asian	3	-
East/Southeast Asian	6	4
European	1	-

**Pre-migration Experience**

Among the ELL respondents with a high school diploma, 14 were foreign-born and arrived in Canada at an average age of 13. All reported that they had access to good education in their home countries. They consistently asserted that students were expected to work hard to meet the rigorous curriculum requirements and high expectations of academic excellence. Thus, they arrived in Canada with an academic advantage, and were able to focus their time on enhancing their English language proficiency and studying language-intensive subjects, such as language arts and social studies. Respondents took pride in their solid academic records in their home countries. Six respondents rated themselves in the top 20% of all students in their schools.

Eleven of 14 foreign-born high school diploma holders grew up in the middle- or upper-middle-class families. They enjoyed a comfortable, stable home life. One or both of their parents were university-educated professionals or business owners who either were capable of directly supporting them in their learning, or had the financial means to hire tutorial services. A respondent stated, “My parents were great examples to me. They had achieved so much. Their examples propelled me to move forward. They supported me to explore any direction I wanted when I was younger ... They fostered the love of learning.” The remaining three foreign-born participants were brought up in working-class families. Their parents made up for their lack of formal education with an ability to draw upon the expertise in their social networks, such as with other educated family members, to support their learning. Regardless of their socioeconomic background, all foreign-born participants indicated that their parents consistently reinforced the importance of education, and communicated high expectations for their educational achievements and future career directions.

Further, foreign-born high school diploma holders generally indicated that they learned English at an early age. However, they pointed out that English language instruction focused more

on writing and reading comprehension than oral communication. Socially, respondents enjoyed positive social interactions with their immediate and extended families, neighbours, and friends. Several reminisced about good friendships at school that made it "fun" and motivated them to learn.

In the cohort of early school leavers, 19 ELL respondents were first-generation immigrants and arrived in Canada at an average age of 13. In their home countries, most foreign-born respondents grew up in working-class families. Only five respondents reported that at least one of their parents had worked in a professional field. The remaining 14 respondents indicated that their parents had limited or no formal education, and were employed as workers, farmers, or salespersons. Ten respondents indicated that they had lived in poverty before coming to Canada. Two had to work at an early age to help support their families. In addition, 14 respondents and their family members had experienced life as refugees. They escaped civil war and state persecution and stayed in refugee camps for an extended period. Those who could revisit their refugee experiences recalled hardship, restriction of daily life activities, abuse, and danger. A participant recounted his experience:

One of my brothers got killed in front of me. My big brother tried to protect us, and he got hurt from a stab of a knife to his chest. I got bomb explosion that hurt my leg. I heard people beating up my mom. She still got marks on her back. I was five years old. We left Somalia and stayed in a refugee camp in Kenya, waiting for a sponsor for ten years.

Socioeconomic standing and life circumstances in their home countries affected the differential access of respondents to education. Only three of the 19 foreign-born respondents without a high school diploma indicated that they benefited from a good education in their home countries. The majority of respondents (N = 14) reported that their chaotic, transient life experiences as displaced refugees resulted in sporadic, disrupted education (N = 11) or no formal education (N = 3). Most respondents (N = 16) indicated they had limited or no exposure to the English language. Respondents from a refugee background tended to report a lack of engagement in schooling activities and poor school performance before coming to Canada.

## **Personal Qualities**

Respondents described their personal qualities in their interactions with family, school, community, and peers. Almost all respondents (N = 16) with a high school diploma considered themselves motivated, hard-working, and disciplined individuals. They took pride in having a solid study ethic and positive life aspirations. They talked about their abilities to draw on their life experiences and those of positive role models for inspiration. They also conveyed an ability to set long-term goals, and most had set their eyes on professional occupations. Furthermore, many respondents (N = 12) viewed themselves as confident, intelligent individuals. They rated their intelligence favourably. A respondent assessed her strength: "I like to strive for excellence. I am determined to do something when it gets started, and I am determined to do it right."

Among respondents in the high school non-completion cohort, 11 were pushed out of high school. They were all foreign-born and came to Canada at the age of 16 years or older. They presented a mix of personal strengths and challenges. They expressed different levels of intellectual ease in learning various subjects. The majority (N = 9) of these respondents viewed themselves as motivated, disciplined individuals with high expectations. Some (N = 4), however,

had struggled to assert themselves in asking for support. Two respondents admitted that they were somewhat unfocused in their studies.

Those respondents who dropped out of or were expelled from high school were either born in Canada (N = 3) or were aged ten years or less upon arrival in the country (N = 8). They tended to view themselves negatively. All reported poor self-esteem and did not see themselves as competent, intelligent learners. They admitted feeling socially awkward, and either became withdrawn in social situations or, conversely, attempted to hide their insecurity behind an inflated sense of humour (i.e., "being a clown") or "tough" mannerisms. Many respondents acknowledged that they lacked the personal motivation and self-discipline to learn (N = 8). They attributed their lack of a personal drive to discouragement from past failures, challenging life circumstances, distractions, and low expectations from others in their upbringing. They viewed themselves as frustrated individuals and attributed their frustrations to unresolved traumas, unfortunate circumstances, and persistent tensions in their interactions with other people. Their accounts, as demonstrated in the following quote, often conveyed a sense of helplessness and victimization:

I had a lot of frustration. Sometimes, I couldn't deal with it. I thought over and over ... I had a lot of wounds when I was little. I felt like why does this happen to me. Why am I not smart? Why am I poor? Why am I this or that? Why do people pick on me? Why did my people get killed in the war?

### **School Interaction and Support**

All respondents with a high school diploma considered their experience in Alberta schools to be positive. They found their school environment to be conducive to learning and social development. In their view, their schools were academically driven and set high expectations and standards for academic excellence. Though a few respondents felt racial tensions at their schools at times (N = 3), most thought their schools valued cultural diversity. Almost all respondents reported that they had access to competent, caring teachers (N = 16).

Due to early exposure to English in their home countries, ten individuals in the diploma holder group felt they needed extensive ELL instruction during their K-12 school career. Those who needed ELL instruction in elementary and junior high years (N = 4) recalled that they were pulled out of their classes for reading and writing support on a one-to-one or small-group basis. More respondents (N = 6), especially those from schools with a high ELL population, reported attending structured ELL classes in senior high school. A respondent shared her ELL experience:

The teachers trained us to write in English; we had to read a novel and write a book review. They taught us to read Shakespeare, a simple version of Romeo and Juliet. We also watched movies and had conversations with other students and teachers. It was like a normal class, with less than 20 students. There was also help from ELL club, where the ELL students could go there and just talked in English, and got help from teachers if they had problems with assignments.

Diploma holders identified a wide range of learning strategies they had used throughout their K-12 school years in Canada. Outside of the formal classroom, they spent time studying and reading books. They joined study groups and learned from their peers. They prioritized their learning efforts, and made use of technology and learning resources. Many respondents indicated that they readily accessed and received school support services, such as tutorial support or peer mentorship, to meet their academic and social needs (N = 13). Several students proactively

consulted with their school counsellors about course selection and their planning for post-secondary education or future careers (N = 9). Most respondents were actively involved in school extracurricular activities (N = 15). They credited their growth in self-confidence, leadership development, and enrichment of their learning experience to their active involvement in sports, student-run clubs, or volunteerism.

Respondents in the high school non-completion cohort provided different accounts of their experience in the K–12 school system. In their assessment of the school environment, only five respondents felt their schools had a safe environment for learners of diverse backgrounds. All remaining respondents (N = 17), including a disproportionately high number of those who dropped out or were expelled from high school, observed a lack of school efforts to promote different cultures and noted that students segregated themselves based on race, class, and language ability. As early as elementary school, several respondents had experienced or witnessed incidents of racism. A respondent complained:

There was lots of racism and people put you down ... Someone was calling me Paki. There were so many fights! I remember in elementary, I was playing basketball, and two white kids walked up to this Punjabi guy and beat him up. They took off his turban. I went to help him. These white kids were just grabbing it and running.

Academically, all respondents from the high school non-completion group had encountered persistent challenges in their learning in various subjects. Those with limited English proficiency (N=12) felt lost in English-rich courses. Due to the school practice of age-appropriate placement, nine respondents struggled with a significant knowledge gap. A respondent shared his experience:

Back home [Sudan], I finished grade 4. I came here and was put in grade 9. English wasn't easy for me. I was nervous and didn't know how long it would take me to learn like others. I didn't have many friends at school. I felt sad, felt bad; I sat there and looked stupid.

Three respondents were diagnosed with learning disabilities. They, however, doubted the appropriateness of the diagnoses. They felt the schools mistook their lack of English language skills for a learning disability. Regarding course selection, respondents tended to take courses in the secondary academic stream (i.e., Math 10-3 or Science 14), which would prepare them to receive a certificate of high school achievement rather than a high school diploma.

Despite the tremendous academic challenges facing the high school non-completion cohort, only a few respondents (N = 4) reported having access to adequate academic support, including individualized teaching instruction. The majority of respondents (N = 18), however, described a lack of learning support for ELL learners. With respect to English language instruction, most respondents indicated that they needed moderate to high levels of ELL support at one point during their K–12 experience. However, English language instruction was often provided in a mixed group setting to learners with varying levels of English proficiency. They received little or no integrated ELL support in subject classes, and did not have access to after-school support. Twelve respondents pointed out the lack of involvement of ELL learners in the planning of their course selection. They indicated that they neither received adequate information about graduation requirements, nor understood the relationship between their selection of courses and the type of diploma or certificate they would receive. Nine respondents reported that they did not receive adequate support to address the knowledge gap created by the practice of age-appropriate

placement without consideration of their actual levels of knowledge and skills.

Respondents in the high school non-completion group further provided differing accounts of their interaction with school personnel. Six respondents indicated that their teachers, principals, and other school staff were responsive to their learning needs and respectful of their cultural backgrounds. Unfortunately, more respondents (N = 16) experienced great difficulty in their relationships with teachers and school personnel. They felt their teachers had low expectations for them and were indifferent to their learning and progress. A respondent expressed his grievance:

When I asked the teachers for help after school, they would be like, “No not today come tomorrow.” They don’t even care; it doesn’t even make you wanna come in the morning ... Over here, the people who want to learn they will help, those who fool around, the teachers just let them fool around.

In the psychosocial arena, several respondents from the high school non-completion group (N = 10) indicated that they experienced difficulties during their transition from one school division to the next school division, or when they moved from school to school. In addition to new physical settings, they had to adapt to new school culture and expectations and adjust their interactions with others. The majority of respondents in the high school non-completion cohort (N = 17) indicated either their lack of awareness of or their reluctance to access extracurricular activities and school support. Those who were expelled from high school (N = 7) engaged in undesirable behaviours, such as repeated truancy, acting out, participation in physical fights, drug use, and bullying. They were unequivocally critical of the practice of school suspension. They did not see the logic in removing learners from school life when they had already disengaged. They felt the practice of suspension failed to support learners in addressing their challenges, and instead further alienated struggling individuals.

### **Family Interaction and Support**

The cohort of high school diploma holders enjoyed positive interaction with and strong support from their parents and other family members living in Canada. Most (N = 15) indicated that their parents had always had a vested interest in their learning and were actively involved throughout their K–12 education. They credited their parents with ensuring a structured home learning environment at an early age that set the stage for their development of an appropriate learning ethos and lifelong study ethic. Their parents directly assisted them with homework support, arranged in-home tutorial services, or registered them in a private academic enrichment program, such as for-profit math and reading tutoring programs. Their parents also maintained communication with their schools and, at times, advocated for ELL support.

Diploma holders generally expressed pride in growing up in a loving family. Though a few individuals (N = 5) acknowledged some frustration in dealing with the intergenerational gap and role reversal due to their parents’ limited English, a significant majority viewed their parents as positive influences. Respondents articulated their respect for their parents and looked up to them for inspiration and guidance. Seven respondents credited their parents’ positive approach to childrearing with preparing them to deal with negative influences at school and in the community. A respondent stated:

I was morally and ethically brought up well when I was young by my parents. So, the negative peer pressure didn't get to me. I was aware of it, but I always focused on school, so I didn't get involved, and they [negative peers] left me alone.

Respondents in the non-high school diploma holder group, on the other hand, readily reported family structures other than a two-parent family: six were from single-parent households due to divorce, family separation, or death of a parent; two from blended families; and one from a household without any parent. Several respondents came from large families with more than three siblings; one respondent had ten brothers and two sisters. Most respondents (N = 19) indicated that their parents worked in the manufacturing or service sectors after they arrived in Canada. Several respondents stated that their families were struggling financially over an extended period.

In their interaction with family members, only two respondents from the non-high school diploma holder group expressed pride in their positive relationships with their parents and other family members. Most, however, experienced a great deal of strain at home. Eleven respondents perceived their parents' approach to parenting as ineffective. Their parents were physically absent over an extended period, overly lenient, or resorted to verbal and physical violence when dealing with their children's behaviour. Three reflected on the negative influence of their parents and other family members, particularly regarding the development of an attitude of male domination, learned violence, lack of motivation, and illegal activities. Family disruptions, such as divorce and the death of loved ones, created emotional turmoil in the lives of four respondents. A respondent shared how his home life compromised his well-being and learning:

I actually lost interest in school. I started being lazy and slacked with homework. I rebelled in a way because I was really upset about the divorce, because we went from a very tight supportive family to a broken one.

Those respondents from blended families had difficulties getting along with their stepparents. Additionally, respondents expressed frustration about their relationships with their parents due to different levels of acculturation and intergenerational conflict. Although their parents wanted to maintain certain traditional practices, respondents were more eager to adapt to Canadian ways of living. Seven respondents experienced a reversal of roles. A respondent elaborated on a challenging situation that forced him to be financially responsible for his family:

My dad worked less than six months in Canada. Then he got an accident, so he stopped working. He went to school. He wanted to learn English. My mom the same. They got some assistance, but that was still not enough ... I helped. I went to school in the morning and then I went to a part-time job.

Complex family structures, life circumstances, and stressful interactions among family members influenced levels of learning support at home. Only eight respondents recalled that their parents were actively involved in their learning during their elementary or early junior high school years. The accounts of 14 respondents, however, indicated a lack of consistent, structured learning support at home. They identified the lack of literacy and English language skills, demanding work life and irregular work hours, financial difficulties, a lack of knowledge about Canadian education, a lack of knowledge about specific subjects, and passive parenting as hindrances to their parents' involvement in their education.

## **Community Interaction and Support**

Respondents in the diploma-holder group were actively involved in their ethnocultural communities and the broad community. All indicated that they were proud of their cultural heritage and frequently participated in events and activities in their respective ethnocultural communities. At the same time, they demonstrated a high level of ease in their integration into the broad community by having friends beyond their cultural groups (N = 17), using English in most social settings (N = 13), accessing community resources such as a library, tutorial services, and recreational services (N = 15), and volunteering with various organizations (N = 13). A respondent shared her experience:

I learned volunteering is really important as a fact of the Canadian experience. I started from there and applied to be a youth volunteer. I have volunteered to help at festivals or to work with disabled children in summer camps. I find that volunteering helped me integrate better into Canadian society. It helped connect me to native English-speaking students.

Respondents in the high school non-completion cohort, on the other hand, spoke very little about positive interaction in the community. Only six respondents had accessed resources in their communities, such as homework clubs, sports teams, or settlement services. Most respondents (N = 16), however, conveyed a sense of social disconnection from the community. They were not aware of resources and did not access any community-based services. They experienced racism in the form of verbal insults, racial stereotyping, differential treatment by police, and limited access to employment opportunities. Growing up in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods, 11 respondents who dropped out or were expelled from high school were exposed to negative influences, such as crime, drug use and trafficking, and violence. Five respondents admitted that they had engaged in law-breaking behaviours during their junior or high school years. These respondents expressed frustration at growing up in poverty and their experience with racial prejudice.

## **Peer Influences**

Respondents in the cohort of diploma holders characterized their interaction with peers as positive. They were well-connected to their peers at school and in the community. Though many foreign-born respondents gravitated to friendship with other ELL learners or peers of similar cultural backgrounds when they first arrived in Canada (N = 12), over time they had bonded with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds and intentionally sought to develop friendship with English speaking students to improve their language skills. Most respondents (N = 17) indicated that they were able to socialize with other peers with ease, and that their friends were supportive. A respondent recounted her experience: "If you are with like-minded people, your ideas will be fostered and grow. I was surrounded by people who liked to study. We excelled as a group and as individuals as well."

Three respondents from the diploma holder group revealed that they briefly experienced bullying and social exclusion during elementary school years due to their lack of English, racial characteristics, or body weight. However, they pointed out that they had received timely intervention from school personnel to deal with the bullying and that their social life had markedly

improved once they developed English language skills and adapted to school life in Canada.

In the non-high school diploma cohort, respondents overwhelmingly indicated that they had struggled to establish and maintain friendships with their peers (N = 20). Hindering factors, including limited English, newcomer status, being a person of colour or from a religious minority, poor academic performance, diagnosis of a learning disability, or lack of understanding of cultural norms, made some respondents highly vulnerable to social isolation and bullying. A respondent shared his early experience in school:

He [schoolmate] asked me where I came from and what religion I was. I told him I came from Iraq and I am Muslim, and he looked at me and called me a terrorist. After that, I didn't like school.

Seven respondents pointed out that social segregation based on ethnicity in their schools made it difficult for them to develop intercultural friendships.

Respondents who were pushed out tended to report that their social connection improved when they became more proficient in English. They were able to connect to friends with whom they studied and socialized. Those who dropped out or were expelled from high school, on the other hand, were more drawn to individuals who were also struggling at school or in their personal life. These relationships reinforced negative behaviours, such as school truancy, drug use, and fighting. In one instance, the respondent was connected to a criminal gang through his friend.

### **Educational Outcomes and Impact**

Respondents from the diploma-holder cohort consistently reported that their K–12 experience in Alberta schools was positive. They conveyed a sense of belonging in school and felt validated by their academic success. Indeed, all respondents in the diploma holder cohort shared a marked characteristic in their school performance: after an initial dip when they first arrived in Canada or while they needed time to develop English language proficiency, their academic performance had consistently improved and/or been sustained over time. Several respondents (N = 8) indicated that they were recognized for their academic accomplishments. Three were able to join academic enrichment programs or special programs for gifted students.

The award of a high school diploma enabled respondents to pursue post-secondary education. Eleven respondents had either completed their university education or were working toward a university degree at the time of the interview. The remaining six respondents intended to enrol in a post-secondary vocational education program. Two respondents were working in a professional field. All remaining respondents aimed to work in various professional occupations in the future.

Among those in the non-high school diploma group, complex and often frustrating interactions with family, school, community, and peers resulted in their declining or poor levels of school engagement, lukewarm or poor school performance, and ultimately unfavourable educational outcomes. Even though only two individuals who were pushed out of school reported that they had already become disengaged from school, the remaining nine respondents felt discouraged when they realized in grade 12 that they would not have time to meet all the requirements for high school graduation. Almost all those who dropped out or were expelled from school (N = 10) indicated that they increasingly disengaged themselves from schoolwork. They had a history of persistent school truancy and complained about boredom and neglect of their learning needs by the school. A respondent expressed his frustration:

When I turned 17, I decided to quit school. I was not interested no more. I was tired of every day coming to school and sitting in class from eight to three, struggling in classes and going back home. I was tired of waking up every morning. I decided to drop out.

With respect to school performance, very few respondents in the non-high school diploma group rated themselves positively. Five individuals who were pushed out of high school felt that even though their academic performance improved over time as they became more proficient in English, their school records reflected only an "average" achievement. On the contrary, those who dropped out of or were expelled from high school reported a steady decline in their performance over time. All indicated low grades or failure in their academic subjects.

Respondents with high school non-completion status had limited educational and career options. Among those who were pushed out of high school, nine individuals continued to upgrade at a local college to complete the requirements for a high school diploma or certificate. One individual was working full-time as a manual labourer. Two individuals worked part-time in the service sector while upgrading their high school. One individual was unemployed at the time of the interview. Of those who dropped out of high school, three had returned to do high school upgrading, and one was working as a salesperson. Career prospects were bleakest for those who were expelled from high school due to their behaviour. Five of the seven respondents were unemployed or receiving social assistance. Two had managed to return to school to complete their high school education.

## **Discussion**

The analysis of two cohorts of ELL respondents, namely holders of a high school diploma and high school non-completers, has illustrated the differing educational experience and outcomes of ELL learners in Alberta schools. ELL respondents who had attained a high school diploma often came from families with education and/or financial means, often had studied English in their home country, and because the educational system in their home country was rigorous, brought an academic advantage with them to Canada. In the Canadian education system, they functioned as motivated, confident individuals with aspirations. They did well with access to a positive school environment and competent, caring teachers. They received formal and informal support for learning English and had access to academic support and school guidance. High school diploma holders also had a stable family life and received structured learning support and guidance at home. They experienced positive social interactions with both their ethnocultural communities and the broader community, and tended to socialize with supportive peers who shared their commitment to academic excellence. As a result of favourable interactions with school, family, community, and peers, high school diploma holders demonstrated a high level of school engagement and consistently improved or maintained their academic performance. Most respondents had pursued a university education following high school, and some worked professional jobs.

The second cohort of ELL respondents with high school non-completion status had a complex, turbulent K–12 educational experience. This cohort was diverse, comprised of those who were pushed out of high school primarily due to their age, those who dropped out of high school, and those who were expelled from high school. Many individuals were raised in households with family structures other than the two-parent arrangement (i.e., single household, blended family). They had experienced traumatic events and sporadic, disrupted education in their home country.

High school non-completers, especially those who dropped out of or were expelled from school, had struggled with self-esteem, motivation, and self-discipline. In Alberta schools, most respondents defined the school environment as non-supportive or hostile. They encountered a wide range of academic and psychosocial challenges and had moderate to high levels of need for ELL instruction. Most high school non-completers did not receive adequate academic, psychosocial or ELL support. These respondents were highly frustrated by persistent, cumulative learning and social challenges. At home, respondents experienced a great deal of tension, including negative parental influences, family disruption, loss, intergenerational conflict, and role reversal. Most did not receive consistent, structured learning support at home. This cohort rarely accessed resources or participated in civic activities in the community. They were vulnerable to social isolation and negative peer influence. As a result of turbulent interactions with school, family, community, and peers, high school non-completers generally experienced poor or declining levels of school engagement and had unfavourable levels of academic performance. With a high school non-completion status, respondents had limited educational and career choices.

These emerging insights accentuated the need to examine the educational experience and outcomes among ELL learners through an ecological, life-course perspective. Participants in the two cohorts have indeed interacted with the various systems throughout their lives. Whereas most participants in the diploma-holder cohort benefited from supportive, stable relationships with families, schools, communities, and peers, high school non-completers had frequently experienced relational strains and life disruptions. Though participants identified personal motivation as a contributing factor to their academic success or struggle, their sense of initiative was influenced by constraints and resulting stressors in their social interactions at home, in school, and in their communities. The migration and settlement adaptation stresses, as experienced by many participants in the high school non-completion cohort, had amplified their vulnerabilities. Those who arrived in Canada before age ten were particularly vulnerable to maldevelopment of self-concept, social disconnection and frustration. This finding was complementary to the existing research indicating that ELL learners who arrive at an early age are at risk of under-developing or losing their first languages, and often struggle to develop cognitive academic language proficiency in English (Roessingh, 2008; Roessingh & Kover, 2002).

The results of this study further brought attention to class analysis. Notably, they did not support the view that academic success or failure is a matter of natural aptitudes. Instead, they reinforced Bourdieu's cultural capital framework, which asserted two major tenets: first, society is socially stratified based on the possession of economic, cultural, and social resources, and second, social reproduction, facilitated by critical agents such as the family and education systems, perpetuates the persistence of social stratification (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). ELL learners in the two cohorts, indeed, occupied different social strata. The diploma holders whose families occupied middle- and upper-middle classes had better access to learning resources and social and educational support in their home countries and Canada. They were equipped to tap into peer and social networks for support and to access opportunities for civic engagement, such as volunteering. Their class privilege in their home country helped mediate social and economic inequities facing their families in Canada. On the other hand, ELL learners with high school non-completion status often had to deal with their educational and social struggles on their own. They had limited access to institutionalized support and were confronted with strained relationships, including bullying, in their friendships and social networks.

Emerging from the study was the notion of differential privileges and disadvantages among ELL learners. Public discourse has often reinforced a uniform, narrow portrait of ELL learners as linguistically and academically struggling individuals. Although the findings attested to the uneven, challenging English language acquisition process and academic struggles, they also highlighted the social, economic, and educational inequities among ELL learners and their impact on educational experiences and outcomes. For many ELL learners, the significance of language status and immigration history seems to recede when economic class, parental achievement, and family factors are considered. Another related insight from the findings that could inform policy and practice is the importance of broadening the access of ELL learners to resources and support. Over the years, governments, school boards, and schools have allocated limited funding for English language instruction and resettlement services. A focus on broadening access would call for explicit, comprehensive, and coordinated strategies to support ELL learners in all life areas.

The findings were congruent with the existing scholarship on school dropout rates in the general population. Particularly, they confirmed the individual factors that have been linked to early school leaving, such as behavioural, affective, and cognitive engagement in learning (Archambault et al., 2009); competency in academic subjects (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Foley et al., 2014); and childhood trauma and mental health (Dupéré et al., 2018). They supported the established associations between early school leaving and familial issues, including education levels among family members and family poverty (Randolph et al., 2006), residential mobility (Gasper et al., 2012), family dysfunctions (Amato, 2010; Finn, 1989), and financial obligations (Dalton et al., 2009; Monahan et al., 2011). They also drew attention to the association between early school leaving and school quality and school interactions, including access to responsive school support and extracurricular activities (McCabe et al., 2018), qualifications and experiences of teachers (Allensworth & Easton, 2005), quality of school management (Richards, 2009), pedagogical approaches and school climate (Rumberger, 2011), interpersonal conflicts with teachers or peers (Lessard et al., 2008), and school alienation (Alexander et al., 1997). In relation to the ELL-specific scholarship, the findings confirmed the long-lasting impact of traumatic premigration experiences on some immigrant and refugee youth (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016; Ngo et al., 2017; Rossiter et al., 2015). They supported the assertion that academic trajectories among ELL learners are associated with immigrant class, refugee experience, first language, English language proficiency, socioeconomic status, age of arrival, length of time in Canada, family structure, parents' health, and policy responses (Anisef et al., 2010; Garnett, 2010, 2012; Gunderson et al., 2012; Volante et al., 2017; Wilkinson, 2002). Encouragingly, the research findings further reinforced the learning that many early school leavers of an ELL background maintained their desire to complete their high school education, and eventually attended upgrading programs and were able to continue their post-secondary education (see Derwing et al., 1999).

Findings from this study brought to the forefront the critical areas of support that need to be in place to holistically support ELL students in Canadian schools. They illuminated the importance of strengthening access of ELL learners to good classroom instruction provided by caring, qualified, and culturally competent teachers. Those ELL students who have yet to achieve academic English proficiency would benefit from explicit, structured English language instruction taught by trained specialists. In addition to classroom instruction, schools could offer responsive literacy and academic support through before- or after-school tutorial services and homework clubs to ELL learners who had limited education in their home countries. They could adjust the timetable, offer summer programs, facilitate staged, gradual integration of ELL learners into general academic classes and explore the strategic use of school staff to support ELL students

(Roessingh & Field, 2000). Attention to linguistic, educational, and psychosocial needs associated with the age of arrival could help schools develop differentiated support strategies for diverse ELL students. To address the misdiagnosis of limited English proficiency as a learning disability, trained professionals should conduct culturally and linguistically responsive assessments (see Cummins, 1994; Hack et al., 2012). Recognizing complex pre- and post-migration needs, schools could collaborate with community and service partners to reach out, assess, and provide ELL students and their families with trauma-informed counselling and responsive support in resettlement support and life skills development, career planning support and life transition. In addition, access to positive peer and adult mentors of diverse backgrounds could promote positive ethnic and Canadian identities and strengthen a sense of belonging among ELL learners. Finally, a respectful, inclusive, and academically rigorous school environment is crucial for a rich, meaningful educational experience. Education leaders could develop school programs and practices focusing on diversity-centric education, social belonging, cross-cultural exchange, and citizenship. Intentional efforts to engage ELL learners and their parents in school activities and decision-making processes would help schools better understand and respond to the unique needs of ELL learners.

This study had some limitations. It mainly relied on personal accounts of the past experience of ELL learners. Their experiences might not entirely reflect the range of student experience or changes in the public school system since they were enrolled in an ELL program. The disparities in gender, ethnicity, and ELL codes among the ELL cohorts resulted from a strict recruitment protocol approved by the university ethics board, which required prospective participants to initiate their first contact with the research team. Future studies might consider a research design with targeted recruitment and sampling strategies to ensure the representation of diverse groups among research participants. There are opportunities for future research to advance substantive knowledge and influence policy and practice. This study presents an interactive framework that invites focused, in-depth inquiries into the experience of ELL learners with premigration and interactions at home, in school, and in the community, critical examination of how the various factors interact among themselves, as well as quantitative modelling to predict the extent to which the various life factors have influenced educational outcomes. Scholarly efforts could follow early school leavers to understand their life experiences, their decisions to return to school to complete high school (and pursue post-secondary education), and their career trajectories. Future studies could extend our broad comparison between the cohorts and examine differences among ELL students within each cohort. Critical reviews of educational policies, programs, and services for ELL learners, grounded in the integrated framework presented in this study, could help determine availability, comprehensiveness, coordination, and gaps in funding, programs, services, and support for ELL learners. In addition, a focus on responsive support for ELL learners, particularly those at risk of early school leaving, could contribute to coordinated efforts to address educational inequities.

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