Exploring High School Newcomer Youths' Futures: Academic and Career Aspirations

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Abstract

A majority of newcomer youth who have recently migrated to the United States encounter a daunting task of mastering an entire high school curriculum in a new language while attempting to attain college readiness. Very little research exists that examines newcomer youths' transitions from high school to college. Utilizing interviews with six high school newcomer students, this paper aims to answer the following questions: What are the career and college aspirations of high school newcomer youth? What barriers do they face in fulfilling their educational and career goals? The findings will better inform educators, specifically school counselors, about how to better develop their college and career readiness.

Keywords: immigrant youth, college readiness, college access, school counseling

Communities across the United States have welcomed an increasing number of immigrant youth from across the world (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). As minors, immigrant youth have the right to enroll in public K-12 schools (US Department of Education, 2014). Those attending high school for less than three years have the formidable tasks of acquiring English proficiency while mastering an entire curriculum to obtain a high school diploma (Short & Boyson, 2012; Yip, 2013). Because of these demands, educational research has focused on helping newcomer youth graduate high school (Callahan, 2013; Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2001). More recently, scholars like Kanno and Cromley (2015) have called on educational researchers' greater awareness regarding newcomer youths' transition from high school to college. This includes better understanding how school counselors assist newcomer youth with postsecondary planning (Perez & Morrison, 2016; Savitz-Romer, 2019). This interview-based study focuses on the voices of six adolescent newcomer students in grades 9-12 at a community school located in Los Angeles, CA to illustrate their varied college and career aspirations and how school counselors can provide vital resources to help them attain their goals.

Literature Review

Newcomer Youth Defined

A variety of terms are used in regard to newcomer youth. Terms like students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE or SIFE) (Potochnick, 2018), emergent bilingual (García, 2009), or recently arrived immigrant EL students (RAIELs) (Umansky et al., 2018) are used across educational research, policy, and practice. Yet newcomer youths' experiences are complex. Accordingly, there is a need to question how labels used to identify students' needs either "reinforce essentialized stereotypes or open up new understandings" (García-Sánchez & Orellana, 2019, p. 3). Cognizant of the multi-dimensionality of immigrant youths' lives, including their agency and aspirations (Daniel, 2019; Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018), I utilize the term "newcomer youth" throughout this paper. Newcomer youth refers to recently arrived immigrant youth, regardless of their legal

status, who are classified as English learners upon entry into US schools and have attended US schools up to three years (Umansky, 2018).

High School Experiences

Newcomer youth may have different journeys to the United States, but the majority share the experience of attending local K-12 schools. A small minority attend secondary schools (Callahan, 2005). Many attend schools affected by racial, economic, and linguistic segregation (Orfield & Ee, 2014). The fact that newcomer youth experience linguistic segregation limits their ability to access classes where a "high level of academic English is spoken" (Orfield & Ee, 2014). As English learners (ELs), they often spend time in classrooms where the teacher's primary focus is to develop their English proficiency (Callahan, 2005). Allard (2013) argues that this negatively affects newcomer youths' ability to interact with other students who are more proficient English-speaking students or familiar with US, culture causing them to be "less expos[ed] to socialization into mainstream high school practices that can leave them uninformed about" graduation and college requirements (p. 20). Placement in English language development classes has also been found to limit their access to a college preparatory curriculum (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Umansky, 2018).

This differential access to rigorous academic experiences results in lower levels of college readiness (Callahan & Shifrer, 2012). Studies find that newcomer youth struggle to graduate high school (Flores et al., 2009; Gándara, 2017; Morse, 2005; Silver et al., 2008) or graduate high school neither "college-nor career-ready" (Kanno, 2018b, p. 1). Of the latter, the majority enroll in community college (Kanno, 2018a; Kanno & Harklau, 2012; Suárez-Orozco & Osei-Twumasi, 2019; Umansky, 2018). Community colleges can play an important in helping newcomer youth further strengthen their English-language skills and academic skills to be successful at a four-year college (Razfar & Simon, 2011; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2019; TESOL, 2012). However, research has also shown that students who begin their high education career in community college are less likely to attain a bachelor's degree (Ma & Baum, 2016).

As such, questions arise about the type of access newcomer youth have "to clear and timely information about higher education options" (Suárez-Orozco & Osei-Twumasi, 2019, p. 49). Newcomer students' high school experiences have important implications for their access to post-secondary opportunities (Kanno & Cromley, 2015;

Sadowski, 2013; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015; Umansky, 2018) and social mobility (Gándara, 2017; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2019; see also Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010).

The research questions that drive this study are the following:

1. What are the career and college aspirations of high school newcomer students?

2. What barriers do newcomer students face in fulfilling their educational and career goals?

Methods

Research Site

To examine newcomer youths' understanding of their academic and career goals, I utilized a qualitative approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This qualitative inquiry took place at a K-12 community school located in a Latinx and Asian immigrant community in Southern California. As a community school, it partners with community organizations to provide quality academic, enrichment, and health and social opportunities (Coalition for Community Schools, n.d.). For example, at the time of data collection, they opened a legal clinic to address the needs of students and their families who are first- and second-generation immigrants. Most students attending the school are from families that migrated from Mexico and Central America. Finally, a high percentage of students were identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged and classified as English learners.

To identify potential participants, I utilized purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This type of sampling allowed me to select a variety of newcomer youth who were currently enrolled in an ELD course despite their age or grade level (Maxwell, 2013). Being cognizant of the fact that establishing relationships with potential participants is a key design decision (Maxwell, 2013), I decided to volunteer in the classroom to form relationships with the newcomer youth. At the end of my time as a volunteer, I began participant recruitment.

Participants

Five out of the six participants attended the same class, made up of students from various countries, language backgrounds, ages, and grades. In the class, five students identified as men and one as a woman. The six participants ranged in age from 14 to 19, which meant that some would be graduating at the age of 21, which is within their legal right (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Age is important to note given that older students might have experiences that differ from those of traditional 14 to 18-year-old high school students. Two students per 9th and 10th grade were recruited, while only one from 11th and 12th grade was recruited. This was due to the very small number of 11th graders in the ELD 1/2 classroom. A senior was invited to participate to better understand longitudinally the experiences of newcomer youth. All the participants were Spanish-speaking, and half also spoke an indigenous language, either Zapotec or K'iche. The latter described themselves as emergent trilingual, noting their indigenous language as their native language. Finally, most students were from Central America—Guatemala (2), Honduras (1), and El Salvador (1). Two students were from Oaxaca, Mexico, a state with a high population of indigenous people.

Table 1
Demographics of Participants

Student*	Grade Level	Languages Spoken	Native or Foreign Born	Country of Origin	Length of Time in the United States
Eduardo	12th	Spanish; Zapotec	Foreign Born	Mexico	3 years
Jorge	11th	Spanish; K'iche'	Foreign Born	Guatemala	2 years
Sergio	10th	Spanish	Foreign Born	Guatemala	2 years
Carlos	10th	Spanish; Zapotec	Native Born	Mexico	1 year
Gómez	9th	Spanish	Foreign Born	Honduras	Less than a year
Sofía	9th	Spanish	Foreign Born	El Salvador	Less than a year

Note: All student participants are referenced by their pseudonyms.

Data Collection

Because interviewing entails a "social relationship" (Seidman, 2013, p. 97), I thought it important to establish a relationship prior to engaging in interviews with

newcomer youth. During the spring semester of the 2018-2019 school year, I attended their class once a week and assisted the teacher in providing support to individual students or small groups of students. After a couple of months, I invited them to individually participate in an interview based on the three-part Seidman phenomenological interview (Seidman, 2013).

This one interview was divided into three parts, which focused on the newcomer experience, their college and career aspirations, and their access to college information. These semi-structured interviews allowed me to explore how newcomer youth made sense of their college and career aspirations while giving me the flexibility to respond to new information provided by individual participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transcription took place after the interviews had occurred. All the interviews were conducted in Spanish as well as the analysis to not "risk losing important meaning embedded within the language of the participants" (Olson, 2011, p. 59). Once transcriptions were finalized, I engaged in member-checking by inviting them to review the interview and report any inconsistencies (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). Findings are reported in English.

Analyzing the interviews consisted of three rounds of coding. One round consisted of jotting down initial thoughts or themes that came up after the transcript was transcribed. In this stage, I made note of students' juggling of both work and school and the consequences working had on their academics and ability to access support. After a second round of axial coding, I created more specific categories that became the basis for the identified themes in the final round of coding (Creswell 2013; Merriam & Tisdell 2016; Saldaña 2016). By listening to their descriptions of their current educational experiences and future goals, I documented themes encompassing their experiences during the final round of coding (Creswell 2013; Saldaña 2016). Consequently, I found variations among newcomer youths' future aspirations as well as reasons for pursuing certain careers and the obstacles complicating their educational journeys.

Findings

Table 2

Description of Participants and their Career and College Aspirations

Student	Grade Level	Age	Post-Secondary Aspiration	Career Aspiration
Eduardo	12th	18 years	Community College/Vocational School	Chef
Jorge	11th	19 years	Community College/Vocational School	Chef
Sergio	10th	18 years	Community College/Vocational School	Nurse or Bus Driver
Carlos	10th	16 years	Four Year University	Veterinarian
Gómez	9th	14 years	Community College then transfer to a Four-Year University	Unsure
Sofía	9th	18 years	Community College/Vocational School	Nurse or Photographer

Underexplored Newcomers' Career and College Aspirations

Sitting with Carlos, a 15-year-old Mexican sophomore, in the office space of the school dedicated to teacher prep, we discussed his academic and career aspirations. He, like the rest of the students interviewed, shared how the school invested time and money to take them on field trips to local universities. Despite these trips, Carlos noted how "they have asked me if I want to continue studying, but them asking me what I want to study, well no, almost no one [has asked me]." Carlos makes the distinction between being asked if he wants to go to college and being specifically asked what academic interest he would like to pursue in college. He states how "*casi nadie*" [almost no one] has asked him what he would like to study in college. This is an important distinction for Carlos because he believes that educators

> should give more information or ask what it is you want to study and based off that take us to [visit] universities.

Carlos proposes that college visits should be tailored to their academic and career interests as opposed to hosting general campus visits. According to him, this would be a better use of resources, including time and money, because these field trips would specifically provide insight into the specific college and related career pathways. For Carlos, this would mean visiting colleges that offer undergraduate programs that can prepare him for a career in veterinary medicine. Though he recounts how no one knows

about his future goals, Carlos remained steadfast in his goal of wanting to attend *la universidad* to become a veterinarian.

The youngest of the participants, Gómez, a 14-year-old Honduran, also aspired to attend a four-year college, but only after attending community college, which he viewed as a necessary first step toward achieving a bachelor's degree. Because he used the word *colegio* to discuss his future goals post-high school graduation, I asked a clarifying question to determine whether he wanted to attend a two-year or four-year college after high school. Gómez quickly responded

> I would say that, that I should first go to community college because, maybe, in community college, they would explain the steps, they would let me know this is how universities work and all that information.

Gómez shared that community college would be a site where he could receive more information about the higher education process (Bragg & Durham, 2012). This is surprising given that his school employed an academic and college counselor. School counselors have long been critiqued for acting as "gatekeepers to postsecondary opportunity rather than facilitators of access and enrollment" (Savitz-Romer, 2019, p. 33). Gómez noted how his school counselor encouraged him to continue to get good grades but had not yet explained the college requirements he needed to fulfill. While he wanted to attend a four-year university, he lacked information about how to meet college eligibility. For this reason, Gómez sought to "use community college as a steppingstone" (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2019, p. 8) towards his bachelor's degree.

Varying Timelines Influence Educational Goals

Five of six participants all wished to continue their post-secondary studies at a two-year college. This is reflective of the current trend where community colleges have the "largest concentration of immigrants in higher education" (Suárez-Orozco & Osei-Twumasi, 2019, p. 3). Sergio and Sofía's reasons for attending community college were influenced by their decision to pursue a short-term career. Sergio was a 19-year-old Guatemalan sophomore, while Sofía was an 18-year-old Salvadoran sophomore. Both were particularly concerned about choosing a feasible career. For Sofía, her goals consisted of

> finishing high school, knowing more English, and, if possible, if it is doable, pursuing a career, I do not know [which one]. The easiest, I think…[and] also the most economical, which would be nursing or photography.

Sergio expressed similar sentiments in that he wished to become either a "nurse or bus driver" because these careers required the least amount of schooling. He stated attending a community college presentation where representatives shared

> they offered short-term career training to be a nurse or bus driver, like the easiest and all. And those are the ones I decided...because I am here by myself and I do not want to spend too much money... [I want a career] that is short-term and secure.

For both Sofía and Sergio, who would be graduating high school at the age of 21, it was important that they pursue careers that did not require an extensive amount of schooling that might burden them financially, by either being costly and preventing them from entering the labor market sooner. Both Sofía and Sergio's college and career goals seemed to reflect their concerns about college affordability as well as their desire to "gain skills to prepare for the labor market...and move up the economic ladder" (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2019, p. 9).

Overcoming Barriers and a Silver Lining

Four of the six newcomer youth worked a minimum of 35 hours while they attended high school. Carlos, Sergio, Jorge, and Eduardo all reported balancing both work and school throughout the academic year. Prior research shows that Latinx males are more likely to be both students and wage-earners (Hopkins et al., 2013). Other scholars have found that working more than fifteen hours negatively impacts college readiness and completion (Carnevale & Smith, 2018; Johnson et al., 2011; Kyte, 2017).

Three of the four worked to cover all their living expenses. Carlos was only expected to partially contribute toward rent. As 19-year-old Jorge shared with pride, "I cover my own rent and all that I have." Jorge, Eduardo, and Sergio all lived with extended family relatives and were financially responsible for their rent, food, and personal expenses. Sergio described that going to school and work meant having no time to complete his homework. He stated that when he did have time, "I do it, and when I do not, I do not." Eduardo, who used to work full-time between 9th and 11th grade, reduced his hours during his senior year because he was at risk of not graduating. He described that immediately after leaving school, he would report to work.

> Well, I would get out at 10:30pm and I would arrive at the house around 11, 11:30, 11:30pm because the bus is sometimes delayed.... I would arrive like at 11:30pm-12am to do homework.

Depending on whether he had a lot of homework to do, he would find himself staying up until 2am or 3am. Jorge, too, voiced

> I used to work a lot, but I would get very tired. In school, I was all drained and I could no longer do anything, and I decided that it would be best to reduce the hours I worked.

Working long shifts was interfering with their ability to dedicate time and attention to their demanding course loads.

Moreover, going from school to work and then home every day meant that newcomer youth had little time to do homework or participate in after-school activities like tutoring or extracurriculars. While Sofía and Gómez hesitated in joining a sports team due to their worries about how it might affect their grades, Jorge, Eduardo, and Sergio all shared how work prevented them from joining the soccer team. Jorge, for example, was aware that students stayed after-school to practice, but noted that "since I work after-school, I do not have any time to stay and, also, even if I wanted to, I cannot." The necessity to work not only impeded their ability to do well academically, but also their ability to socialize with peers outside of their academic classes, like on the soccer field. As Sergio commented, working meant that "there is never time" to complete homework or have fun with friends like the average teenager might experience.

Despite the long hours at work, Jorge and Eduardo utilized their work experiences to inform their career aspirations in a way that was not possible through their schooling experience. Eduardo reported working in a kitchen as a cook. No longer living with his parents and having his mother to prepare him meals, he shared that

> Ever since my first day that I arrived [at] work, I felt a connection between me and the kitchen; you know, sometimes I have arrived from school, I have had problems, and I arrive, and I concentrate on cooking and I feel it relaxes me. I feel it is my passion.... I feel comfortable cooking.

Additionally, he visited a local trade school where he toured a culinary arts classroom. After this experience, he realized that he wanted to continue his post-secondary studies there. His accrual of many years of cooking experience, at home and work, informed his goal of being a "good restaurant chef and teaching and giving other cooks encouragement." On the other hand, Jorge, who also worked as a cook, described how he was strategic with the type of work experiences he accepted. At the time of the interview, Jorge was working at a Mexican restaurant and had previously worked in

Korean and Chinese restaurants. He purposefully changed jobs every couple of months to expand his knowledge on the varying types of cuisine. He described how

> I always want to change every so often to learn a little more about each cuisine. Like right now where I am at, I have learned everything. And maybe in a couple of months, I will move to another [job] to learn something else. That is what I want: to learn."

Jorge and Eduardo, like the others, worked out of necessity but their training as cooks, which was not part of a formal internship, offered them a space to explore the world of the culinary arts. Ultimately, their work experiences were shaping their future aspirations and they hoped to one day receive formal training and advance in the kitchen hierarchy.

Discussion

Interviews with these six students revealed that newcomer students want to go to college and have various reasons for selecting their academic and career pathway. The findings from this study confirm what previous researchers have found concerning newcomer youths' desire to pursue postsecondary education (Hos, 2016; Hos, 2019; Suárez-Orozco & Osei-Twumasi, 2019) but as Gómez and Carlos reminds us, newcomer youth remain "at a loss" about how to attain these goals (Suárez-Orozco, 1989, p. 8).

This study also finds that newcomer youth are confronted with adult-like responsibilities despite being teenagers. Work seems to hamper their ability to socialize with fellow peers, teachers, and school counselors in academic and extracurricular spaces (Allard, 2013). Most surprising is that their career goals tend to be informed by their needs as older immigrant youth or work experiences, even without supplemental information from school counselors who can help "strengthen students' college-going aspirations as well as academic preparation for postsecondary education" (Savitz-Romer, 2019, p. 77).

Limitations

There are a few limitations to this study. The newcomer youth population at this school was smaller than that of other nearby large comprehensive public high schools. Further studies should consider the size of the newcomer student population to ensure

that a greater range of experiences across gender, socioeconomic, and immigration status are accounted for. Incorporating the perspectives of school counselors could help illuminate the structural barriers that impact newcomer youths' access to academic and college counseling. Finally, extending this study to include the voices of newcomer youth in rural as well as new immigration destinations would be helpful in providing insight about their academic experiences and college pathways.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the range of college and career aspirations that newcomer youth espouse and the obstacles they encounter on their college pathways. The high school newcomer youth in this study wished to embark on some postsecondary education, which they see as necessary to achieve their career goals. Yet they lacked information about what college they should attend to pursue their academic interests, the necessary steps they needed to complete to embark on a four-year college journey, or up-to-date information about how to navigate the rising cost of education. Because many wanted to pursue short-term careers, they noted that attending a community college as their ideal college choice. This information raises questions about how exactly schools and school counselors are preparing all students to be college ready.

More specifically, how are schools equipping newcomer youth with the necessary academic skills to be successful in community college to ensure that they complete their chosen degrees, certificates, or, in the case of Gómez, transfer to a four-year university (Ma & Baum, 2016). For students like Gómez, this is of upmost importance given that "directly entering a four-year college has become a key predictor of eventual bachelor's degree attainment" (Suárez-Orozco, et al., 2019, p. 9). School counselors must continue to receive training about how to meet the needs of English learners and work strategically to provide comprehensive college and career counseling, which includes preparing students to be successful across a variety of postsecondary education contexts, including career and technical education. This is what college for all entails (Savitz-Romer, 2019).

By first building relationships with newcomer youth to understand who they are as young adults and acknowledging newcomer youths' college and career aspirations, school counselors can begin to regularly meet and tailor information to students' specific goals throughout their high school career to ensure a successful transition from high school to college. Ultimately, educators should equip newcomer youth with concrete information

and provide ample opportunities for them to explore their passions and interests and help them lead fulfilling lives.

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