

# Understanding the Experiences of Immigrant Families within the Somerville Education System



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## Background

Somerville is a racially diverse city, with 24.8% of its population being born outside of the United States as of 2017. The Somerville school system is 63% non-White, with Hispanic students accounting for 42.2% of the system. Additionally, 49.1% of students in Somerville have a first language that was not English, and 21.1% of students are English Language Learners (ELL). Only 13% of Somerville's ELL are meeting or exceeding expectations according to the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. Although it is clear that immigrants make up a large portion of the Somerville school system more can be done to understand their experiences in the educational system and compile their recommendations to improve the educational system.

## Purpose

The purpose of our research is to learn about the experiences of immigrant families and children in the educational system in Somerville using a community based participatory research approach (CBPR). In this effort, we collected qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interviews from immigrant parents of children in K-12 and community stakeholders who work with immigrant families in Somerville.

## Community-Based Participatory Research

In CBPR, community and academic partners work collaboratively on all phases of a research project, from conception to dissemination. For this project, students of Tufts University collaborated with The Welcome Project, a nonprofit organization in Somerville. This research was initiated by The Welcome Project, whose staff approached Shalini Tendulkar and her team of CBPR students.

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## Methodology

### Participants & Design

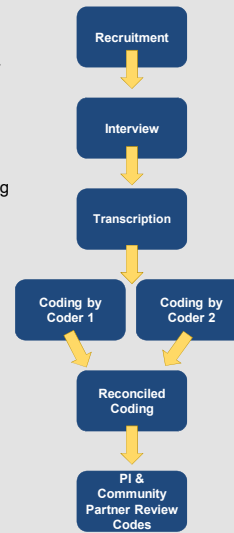
#### Parents (n=21)

- Immigrant parents of children K-12 from the Somerville community
- Semi-structured interviews
  - Two-on-one (student and interpreter)
  - One-on-one (student speaking in participant's native language)
- Recruitment via the Welcome Project's English for Parents classes

#### Stakeholders (n=11)

- Stakeholders who work with immigrant communities in Somerville
- Two-on-one semi-structured interviews
- Outreach via email

### Research Process



## Coding Schema

- Length of residence in Somerville
- Somerville information
- Organizations in Somerville
- School description
- Programs
- Parent experiences within the school system
- Child experiences within the school system
- Resources at the school or school district level to support families
- School culture
- Social determinants of health impacting immigrant families
- Recommendations

## Limitations

Small sample size  
Convenience sample  
-Parents all recruited through Welcome Project's English classes  
-All parents of children in the Somerville public school system  
-Predominantly female  
-Some schools may be overrepresented in the sample compared to others

## Findings

### Immigrant Parent Experiences within the Educational System

#### Negative Experiences and Perceptions

- Limited diversity among school staff and continued need for cultural humility among staff
- Need for more administrative communication
- Bullying overlooked by school faculty
- Parent challenges in assisting with homework
- Lack of special education programs
- Lack of mental health services

#### Positive Experiences and Perceptions:

- General satisfaction with parent-teacher communication
- 88% agreed that education in Somerville was generally better than education received in home country
- Good Access to technology
- School programs are robust

"I think that's a real problem in the Somerville teaching staff. When my son was in middle school, in the entire Somerville teaching population there were four teachers of color. Four. In a majority minority school district." (Parent of 1st and 2nd graders)

"I'm an immigrant, that's all we know, to help my daughter study and educate her. That's the most important thing." (Parent of high school senior)

"I think that's why they aren't as engaged is because they aren't as in power" (Stakeholder)

### Social Determinants of Health Impacting Immigrant Families

#### Immigrant families are negatively impacted by:

- Discrimination experienced in their community
- Inability to afford additional programming
- Fear and uncertainty that cause stress
- Lack of knowledge about school information
- Limited voice and power
- Language barriers

#### Despite challenges, parents are:

- Personally involved with their children's school experience
- Proactively speaking up about community issues
- Spreading information between immigrant families
- Lobbying states to address education gaps

"It is not enough to go to the parent conference. The high school has to give parents meetings on how the school is working, how safety inside. My son in there I would like full support inside the school." (Parent of high schooler)

"Our parent teacher conferences changed dramatically once there were interpreters at all the parent-teacher conferences. The attendance at the parent teacher conferences were as low as 50% and it's up to 90 in all the schools now." (Stakeholder)

"I think an interpreter is important. My child's school has one. Whenever something is going on that person calls me." (Parent of 10 and 17 year olds)

### Resources at School or District to Support Families

#### Communication resources, materials or services:

- Interpretation services and translations of school materials are readily available for parents
- Communication between families and the school system can still be further expanded

#### Teachers, staff or administration trained in cultural humility:

- Expansion of diverse and bilingual staff would further support immigrant families in the Somerville school system

#### Programming directed at immigrant families:

- Sufficient programming and resources are available to immigrant families such as civic engagement and arts
- Schools serve as a pipeline to other resources for families
- Lack of school programming catered specifically toward immigrant parents and incorporating psychological resources

### Recommendations by Participants

#### Parents and stakeholders believe that:

- Improving language access such as interpretation and translation resources is important for communication
- Increasing cultural awareness will help with learning and representation
- Providing mental health services and counseling will foster socioemotional well-being of students
- Ensuring a more equitable distribution of resources and programs will be beneficial to immigrant families
- Increasing representation of immigrants in decision-making at faculty and policy level will empower immigrant families