
International Journal of Student Voice

A peer-reviewed, independent, open-access journal

Pennsylvania State University

Volume 7

IJSV

Spring 2020

Female Immigrant Students' Sensemaking in Toronto Public Schools

Norin Taj

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Citation: Taj, N. (2020). Female immigrant students' sensemaking in Toronto Public Schools. *International Journal of Student Voice*, 7(1). Article 4
<https://sites.psu.edu/ijsv/volume-7-special-issue/>

Abstract: This study explores the experiences of immigrant students from Pakistan by focusing on the micro-level adjustments that students make while interacting with their peers and teachers in Toronto Public Schools. The theoretical framework is grounded in Weber's concept of bureaucracy and the concepts of street-level bureaucrats, deference and demeanor, and sensemaking. By centering the experiences of five female students, this article discusses the concept of authority in education and its manifestation through school's policies and practices. Pakistani society legitimizes teachers' traditional authority while in Canadian classrooms teachers exercise rationallegal authority. The study highlights that although homes and schools are supportive, these female immigrant students struggle with certain issues during the process of adjusting to their new classrooms—when making new friendships, for instance. These female immigrant students also face different expectations of parents in Pakistani homes than their male siblings do. Findings of the study indicate that, while learning the progressive styles of interactions in Canadian classrooms, the immigrant students go through a four-stage

sensemaking process: Assuring, Struggling, Harnessing, and Reassuring. The role and support of parents, teachers, and peers are significant in this process. This empirical study provides a foundation for future research on female learners who experience traditionalist pedagogies—and highlights the importance of including their voice in education policy and practice.

Keywords: Sensemaking, traditional/progressive pedagogies, street-level bureaucrats, deference and demeanor

Introduction

In Canada, most inner-city schools welcome immigrant students. In 2001, about 1.8 million people living in Canada were immigrants who had arrived during the previous 10 years; of these individuals, almost 310,000 (17%) were schoolchildren between the ages of 5 and 16 (Statistics Canada, 2008). In 2011-2012 the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), the largest school board in Canada, served over 256,000 students in nearly 600 schools (Yau et al., 2013). Roughly a quarter of TDSB students immigrated to Canada from over 190 countries, with the top five countries of students' birth (other than Canada) being China (4%), India (2%), Pakistan (2%), the United States (2%), and Bangladesh (1%). English is the sole first language for less than half (44%) of TDSB students. More than 115 languages are spoken by TDSB students, and the five most common non-English languages are Chinese (11%), Tamil (6%), Urdu (5%), Bengali (3%), and Gujarati (2%) (Yau et al., 2013).

Integrating immigrant students to their new classrooms not only requires schools to facilitate equal opportunities for students. It also requires students to understand and adjust to new environments. Failure by either the school or the student diminishes the student's entire learning experience and the purpose of schooling. Studies on Canadian immigrant students mostly discuss their academic issues (Areepattamannil & Freeman, 2008; Klassen, 2004; Lee & Hébert, 2006), their adjustments and sense of belonging (Asanova, 2005; Chow, 2007; Cooper & Cooper, 2008; Desai & Subramanian, 2000; Emme et al., 2006; Li, 2010; Xu et al., 2007), or parental engagement (Ladky & Peterson, 2008; Yoo & Miller, 2011).

This study explores the micro-level experiences of immigrant students from Pakistan, specifically female students, by focusing on the adjustments that they make on a day-to-day basis while interacting with their peers and teachers in Toronto public schools. My focus is not on students' outcomes. Rather, it is on the struggles these students go through in making sense of their new classrooms and schools—something that is not visible in examinations of their progress reports and grades. The literature discusses the concept of authority in education at macro and at micro levels, which informs the day-to-day schooling experiences of immigrant students. Through this study, I have identified a four-stage sensemaking process through which these students go during their adjustment to new school environments.

Literature Review

Concepts of Authority in Canadian and Pakistani Education

The belief of 19th-century Christian theologians that children needed constant discipline propagated educators' impression of authority and punishment (Axelrod, 1997). European settlers brought these values with them to Canada, and thus students' "punctuality, compliance to authority, evening curfews, regular church attendance, and gender segregation" became obligatory (Axelrod, 1997, p. 47). Schooling was an important part of child rearing, and the Department of Education Act of 1891 assigned in loco parentis authority to teachers, meaning that they could stand in place of the parent (Axelrod, 2011). However, the emergence of a free modern society challenged the traditional authority of the church (Furedi, 2009) and also changed the role and authority of teachers in their classrooms. The new progressivist orientation emphasized active learning and allowed some degree of self-direction to the learners (Christou, 2012). In Canadian classrooms today, teachers employ progressive pedagogies and exercise their legal-rational authority without applying coercive disciplinary tactics (Davies & Guppy, 2010).

In contrast, in most of the classrooms in Pakistan, students sit in rows facing their teachers, and those teachers control all activities in the classroom, including knowledge delivery. Students follow firm rules and regulations, and the concept of respect, blended with restrictions, shapes their experience of schooling. The traditionalist pedagogies that are practiced by Pakistani teachers focus on structures and ordered systems, and parents reinforce the authority of teachers since the Muslim tradition instructs that teaching is a noble profession. Indeed, in Pakistani society teachers are regarded as "spiritual fathers" (Bashiruddin, 2018).

The concepts of disciplining children and respecting elders are basic ingredients of the Pakistani culture and are reflected in schooling. Parents aspire for their children to achieve in school, and they also expect them to follow traditions and comply with authority—values which are deeply rooted in cultural and religious norms. Elders make all the important decisions for children, including academic decisions (Mathews, 2000). In addition, local traditions and cultural norms define different gender roles for men and women. From a very young age, girls are treated differently than boys due to traditional concepts such as *pardah* (physical veiling; see Critelli, 2010; Haque, 2010) and *chaar dewar* (private space or confinement of women in four walls; see Critelli, 2010). These traditions perpetuate gender stereotypes and limit females' roles (to productive and reproductive roles), and girls' schooling experiences become different from those of boys.

When Pakistani students, particularly female students, immigrate to Canada they develop different reactions to their new schools' policies. Their responses are influenced by their prior experiences in Pakistan, where emphasis is on teacher authority rather than on critical thinking or problem solving. Their adjustment to new schools is challenging due to their parents' lack of understanding of progressive schooling and belief in teacher-centered approaches. For the Canadian teachers who receive these students, a deeper understanding of different educational pedagogies (traditional vs. progressive) that are embedded in the cultures from which their students come may be required to better understand the dynamics of their classrooms, which are complicated in multicultural environments.

School Systems and Policies

Educational systems are administrative structures which aim to achieve their goals, by focusing on efficiency and by following Weber's (1963) bureaucracy. The educational system of Pakistan is modeled on the colonial British educational system and retained its bureaucratic structure and hierarchy after independence in 1947. Today, the federal government is responsible for implementation of international treaties and agreements, while regional executive leadership is responsible for education policy, curriculum planning, and standards within each province (Institute of Social and Policy Sciences, n.d.). Private schools also work with local authorities for approval of programs. The Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training is headed by the federal minister of education (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, n.d.), and each province has a department of education that is headed by a provincial education minister and a team that includes a district education officer, sub-district education officer, and supervisors or assistant sub-district education officers ("Pakistan," n.d.). Principals and other officials enjoy rational-legal authority, which empowers them to issue commands within the normative rules and their jurisdictional areas.

In Canada, education falls under provincial jurisdiction, and Canadian K-12 schools are considered among the best educational systems in the world (Avila & Wilson, 2011). Ontario's Ministry of Education administers publicly funded elementary and secondary schools and operates four publicly funded school systems (English Public, English Catholic, French Public, and French Catholic). In addition, each Ontario school system has school trustees, a district school board, and locally elected representatives of the public who are responsible for identifying the educational needs and priorities of their community.

Resembling Weber's (1963) bureaucracy, the school systems in both Pakistan and Canada maintain hierarchical bureaucratic structures, standard systems, and

established procedures. Ministries define the job description for each role, and decisions cannot be made without proper approvals. Teachers are required to hold appropriate qualifications, and principals are promoted through established procedures. After a trial period, tenure protects teachers from arbitrary dismissal. In both country contexts, teachers at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy are less involved in organizational decision making and more in implementing procedures. This system allows “loose coupling” (Weick, 1976) between the official policies and their enactment in the classrooms. In schools in Pakistan this loose coupling may give space to teachers’ traditional authority in their classrooms and establish strict rules for interactions. Teachers in Canadian schools may use their own discretion in interacting with students, but their authority is derived from the rational-legal bureaucratic system and, thus, is not unconstrained.

Teachers’ Discretion in Classrooms

Street-Level Bureaucrats

Although teachers are a part of bureaucratic systems, they are also street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) in their classrooms. When they, as SLBs, deliver school policies, they may deliver the policy as “personal” (Lipsky, 1980). For instance, following curriculum guidelines, teachers of the same grade level may develop similar lesson plans but operationalized them differently due to teachers’ personal judgments and responses to situations surfacing in their individual classrooms. Complicated work conditions discourage the use of similar patterns of decisions, so SLBs consider discretion in delivering a policy (Lipsky, 1980). Further, during the process of service delivery (or policy implementation in this case), SLBs seek control over their clients, and the interventions are believed to be for the benefit of the clients (Lipsky, 1980). This practice explains why most parents in Pakistan trust teachers’ decisions and allow them to use intense measures for corrective purposes. It also suggests that immigrant parents would expect similar form of interventions for their children from Canadian teachers.

Demand for Deference and Demeanor

In different societies, deference—a display of symbolic gestures to show respect to others (Goffman, 1956) for dominance or for subordination—is given or taken through different rituals. In traditional societies, the stimulus of strong religious or cultural components in everyday life influences ways of talking to or showing respect for superordinates or subordinates. The advancement of liberal ideas has changed expectations of deference, and in modern society it can also take the form of trust or regard. In his conceptualization of deference, Goffman (1956) also included avoidance rituals that are displayed between people of unequal statuses to avoid harm to those

relationships. Children in Pakistani society are expected to demonstrate deference to their elders by being submissive and compliant, and in return they are offered a sense of security by their elders. Teachers, as spiritual fathers, demand similar deference from students as they deliver knowledge and promotion to the next level in school. In addition, as part of avoidance rituals, children do not ask questions, and elders avoid being open with children due to their belief that friendliness can make children overconfident or stubborn.

Demeanor is a ceremonial behavior in the form of dressing or deportment and conveys that a person has certain qualities (Goffman, 1956). Pakistani teachers present themselves to the society by dressing in socially acceptable manners and avoiding discussions around certain topics which are taboos in the society. Girls from young age are taught to talk, dress and act in certain ways in schools and at home. Similarly, the demeanor of Canadian teachers conveys the social behaviors that are expected and/or acceptable in Canadian society. Following the progressive pedagogies in the last halfcentury, Canadian teachers' demeanor has become less authoritative and more professional. Students must be respectful yet actively involved in class discussions.

Students' Sensemaking

Immigrant students entering Canadian schools, familiar with the social expectations of Pakistani society, soon realize that their old repertoire of learning and rules does not apply to their new situation. In their new learning environment, immigrant students go through a sensemaking process of structuring the unknown (Ancona, 2012; Weick et al., 2005). They learn to interpret policy by observing others' interactions and their teachers' demeanor and gather information about the demands of deference as they forge new friendships.

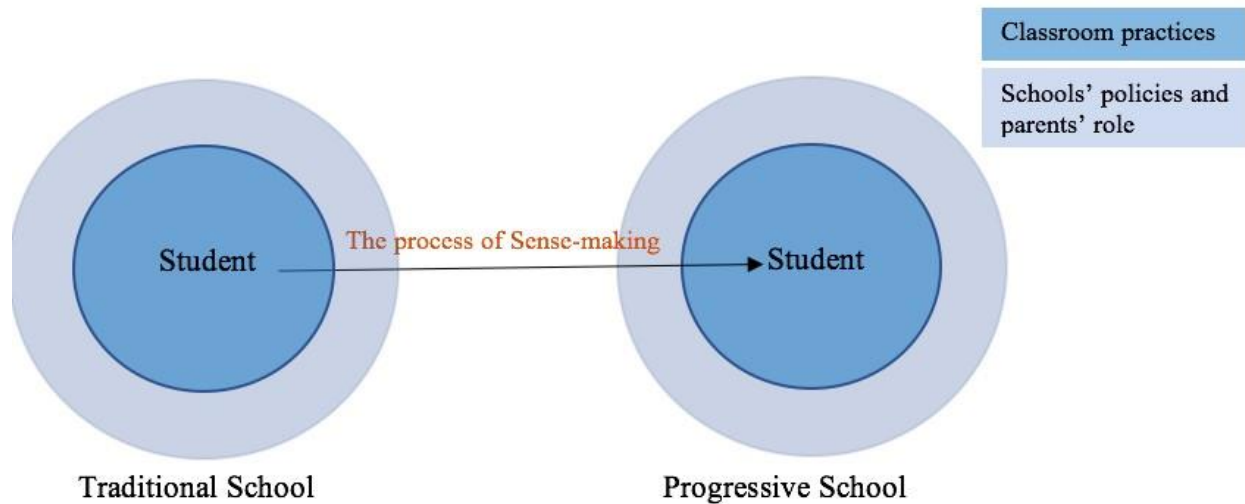
The theoretical literature and comparative education context outlined here raise questions about how female students from traditional schools in Pakistan learn to make sense of the progressive educational system that they encounter after immigrating to Canada. This study sought to answer this question through a qualitative investigation of student sensemaking.

Framework and Method

The following conceptual framework guided this empirical study and informed the design of the sensemaking process that immigrant students experience.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



The data in this study were collected through one-on-one interviews of 10 Pakistani immigrant students, five female and five male. The participants were recruited through purposeful snowball sampling. The details of the study were communicated to prospective participants via my personal contacts, who were familiar with immigrant families in the neighborhood. To participate in the study, interested families approached me directly, and a protocol was followed for the recruitment and interview of each participant. Each interview, approximately an hour long, was audio recorded and later transcribed. For two interviews, mothers wished to accompany the student participants, but for the other eight interviews, parents allowed their children to participate alone. All 10 participants were students who had emigrated from Pakistan; they had spent between three months to three years in Canadian public middle/secondary schools. Prior to coming to Canada, all the participants had attended middle-fee private schools in Pakistani cities.

Interviews were conducted in Thorncliffe Park in Toronto, a densely populated, multicultural neighborhood which is traditionally been a starting point for many new Canadians ("Thorncliffe Park," n.d.). Although English is the most popular language, the top non-official mother tongue and home language, is Urdu and the top birth country for recent immigrants (2011-2016) is Pakistan (City of Toronto, 2016).

Findings and Discussion

Immigrant students' understanding of the macro-level bureaucratic system—namely school assemblies, homework, and school rules—are discussed in the first section below. The findings show that students learn to follow official policies when teachers explain them in their classrooms, but they learn unwritten rules from their friends. Mostly, these immigrant students comply with school policies without necessarily agreeing with them, which could be a result of their previous school experiences and their parents' expectations.

The second section describes student participants' adjustments at the microlevel. It highlights how students' understanding of their teachers' discretion toward expectations of students' behaviors, deference and demeanor, and academic achievements change after attending progressive schools. They learn that each teacher follows a particular set of rules in their classroom, which, although derived from school policies, appears very differently in each class. Moreover, to employ their rules, teachers in each school system exercise their authority differently.

The third section discusses the four-stage sensemaking process of immigrant students and the role of their parents, teachers, and friends in this process of settling.

Bureaucracy in Schools

As discussed earlier, schools formalize various systems and procedures to achieve their organizational goals. Student participants were well familiar with the policies and procedures of both school systems, but they learned new ways to react to the policies in Canadian classrooms.

School Assemblies

School assemblies are not a regular feature in Canadian schools, and the Canadian national anthem is sung in classrooms only. In Pakistan, morning assemblies are essential and follow a similar pattern of gathering in a spacious place every morning and beginning the school day with a prayer and the national anthem. Participants explained that in Pakistan school principals attended morning assemblies, and students stood in lines with their class teachers, following assembly procedures. One participant explained how each class prepared a class presentation on a rotating basis for the assembly, and teachers chose the students for the class presentations. The assemblies are intended to build students' confidence through participation, but teachers' administration of the students and their presentations weakens its purpose. An additional purpose of morning assemblies was, according to one participant, "to check the uniforms," while another pointed out that assemblies also helped to identify

latecomers, as “they used to get pulled out and used to stand at the side till the end of the assembly.... The principal or the teacher used to talk to them later.”

It was evident that the student participants understood the expectations of them as students at the assemblies at their schools in Pakistan, along with the hidden purposes of the assemblies. They obeyed the rules, and none of the participants ever complained to their parents, as schools have gained the legitimacy to deliver what society expects. One participant shared a story of when she tied up her hair in a different colored ponytail and was therefore held back in the school assembly. She did not share the incident with her family because her mother was familiar with the school rules and would have held her responsible for her carelessness.

Homework

The nature of the homework is different in both school systems. In Pakistan, homework is mostly not preplanned, and participants explained that they were asked to copy, complete, and memorize the concepts discussed in class, whereas in Canadian schools, students were assigned worksheets to practice concepts at home. One participant described the experience of homework in Pakistan in the following way.

Over there, homework would take you really long. You would have homework every day, the teacher did not care how much homework she gave you, but it was expected to be finished by the next day.... If you didn't finish it, you got punishments.

Other participants corroborated this report, explaining that their teachers in Pakistan assigned homework, marked it the next day, and did not give additional marks for ontime submissions. However, they penalized students for late or no submissions. Teachers used their authority, and students completed their work out of fear or respect. Participants shared that their parents did not complain to schools about long homework, which indicates that parents might also agree to the school policies related to homework.

In Canadian schools, teachers typically assign the same worksheets to all students in one class or several classes, without considering the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. Davies and Guppy (2010) critique this practice as evidence of a modern school system that is overly bureaucratic and indifferent to individual students' needs. These worksheet assignments tend to take less time to complete than the homework that students usually were assigned in Pakistan.

Rules

The rules instituted in Canadian and Pakistani schools are very different, reflecting the expectations for students in each society. Most participants discussed school rules in Pakistan such as proper uniform, rules about haircuts, trimmed nails, and greeting teachers in unison by standing up when they enter classrooms. While participants did not necessarily agree with these rules, they understood that failing to follow the rules would result in penalties. A participant explained, "There you couldn't talk loud in the class. There, teacher had a stick and he could hit you. Here they take you outside and explain." Another student stated, "There you could not use cell phones, and here you can. Here you cannot sit in the classroom while having lunch, there you had to."

One female student shared a peer's experience when she violated a school rule: "Once a girl brought her cellphone to school, she was reported to the principal, parents were called, and the phone was confiscated." Another female student described rules specific for girls:

We could not let our hair down, could not put makeup..., in short nails and clean shoes. They would pick us up from the lines if the uniform were not clean, from the assembly. Here, you cannot wear short dresses and that is all. If teachers notice it, they would ask you to change ... like in gym clothes or something.

This student explained further that Canadian teachers first explain the rules and then expect the students to follow them. Most participants agreed that there are generally fewer rules in Canadian schools.

Most of the rules in Pakistani schools aim for administrative efficiency and for making students better "obeyers," as parents and society expect. These rules, however, do not necessarily add value to student learning. Again, girls are expected to follow slightly different rules when it came to attire and outlook, which is largely a reflection of Pakistani society's expectations and is reinforced at home.

Teachers' Discretion in Bureaucratic Systems

Bureaucratic school systems require actors to carry out directives, and teachers, as SLBs using their discretion, are the main actors to deliver the knowledge and promote the required behaviors. They may consider some aspects of the policies more important or needed in their classrooms than others. Hence, in heterogeneous classroom environments, as SLBs, teachers' choices of words, expectations, appreciations, or respect vary. Student participants stressed these differences.

Students' Academic Standing

Participants indicated that classrooms in Pakistan were of mixed abilities. One student explained, "Some of them [students] were average, some of them were good and some of them were dumb." Students' academic standing influenced their relationship with teachers, and participants agreed that teachers favored the prefects, who were the smartest students. When asked to explain what "smart" meant, a participant stated, "They stand up in front of the class and talk ... and ask a lot of questions ... and their grades are good." Taking extra responsibility was also listed among the traits of "smart" students. Participants agreed that achieving good grades or being smart would help in gaining teachers' favors or benefits in or outside class—what Lispky (1980) defined as sanctions. For example, a female participant explained:

In Pakistan if the monitor [prefect] has long nails, the teachers would do favoritism and they will say, "it's okay you can cut them," and let them go. But for the normal student the teacher would be strict on them. I have seen this favoritism a lot in Pakistan.

Participants also agreed that in schools in Pakistan, teachers' responses in the classroom were affected by students' responses. That is, one factor for teachers' discrete behavior toward students was the students' behavior itself. The following remarks by two participants clarify this point further. One student reported, "There was an aggressive tone with the troublemaker and a different tone with the smart people." The other participant said, "They used to get scolded by the teachers, but most of them were troublemakers, they used to interrupt classes so they used to get scolded." The participants did not identify the students' academic reputation as a factor for teachers' discretion in Canadian classrooms. In Canadian classrooms, teachers impart knowledge or course content and evaluate students' progress, but that is not the ultimate definer of student-teacher relationship.

Students' Conduct and Policy

Student participants reported that Pakistani teachers tried to follow school policies and expected certain conduct of students, which sometimes resulted in lack of human responsiveness required in a teacher-student relationship. One participant explained, "The teacher would not talk on one-on-one with you ... and the teacher would not understand that the kids were usually scared of the teacher." Another student said, "Here if the [whole] class did not submit work on time, teacher will explain again and give one more day.... Over there the whole class would get punishment."

Due to these firm expectations, Pakistani students' relationships with their teachers may be limited. When asked if in Pakistan they approached their teachers if they needed help, one of the female participants responded, "No, she would shout.... [When] I was getting bad grades, I asked my tuition teacher (private tutor) who helped me in my homework and then I understood." This kind of avoidance, especially by female students, repeatedly came up in the interviews.

Asking questions is not encouraged in Pakistani classrooms since it is considered a way of questioning elders' authority. It also suggests the "do as directed" approach, where the teacher explicitly instructs and explains concepts, rules, and other strategies and students, as dependent obeyers, avoid expressing their ideas in the class. This traditionalist pedagogy makes students much dependent on their teachers' guidance which results in being unable to take the full responsibility of their own learning.

Participants reported that teachers employ different tactics for maintaining their authority, such as punishments, warnings, mockery, or embarrassment. However, immigrant students also justified that behavior: "There the teacher would insult a student in front of the class and the student would feel embarrassed..., but embarrassment would make some difference, like if you make a mistake, you will not repeat it again." Explaining the Canadian classroom experience, one participant said, "They [teachers] try, but if the student is not willing to learn then she [teacher] would just leave you." A female respondent reported, "[In Canada], my eight(h) grade teacher was really strict.... His explanation was good, and he used to make everybody do their homework, so I want that kind of a teacher who makes you do your work and that's a better teacher. My grades were good then."

According to student reports, Canadian teachers' approach is to share the rules, be open for discussion and questions, and handle noncompliance through policy shifts. All participants shared that their Canadian teachers will also contact parents in some situations. In Canadian schools, teachers' behaviors convey that they understand their students' problems, but students are ultimately responsible for their learning—a highlight of progressive pedagogy. The relationship between student and teacher is one of mutual obligation (Davies & Guppy, 2010).

Deference and Demeanor

Raising hands in the classroom, waiting their turn, and seeking permission are deference rituals that teachers expect in Pakistan. As one participant described:

Over there you can't just shout out the answer, you can't walk up to the teacher's desk without asking, and you can't get bathroom breaks but depends on teacher.

Here, if a teacher is asking a question, everyone is getting involved... Mostly you can shout out the answer and teacher would be like “yes” or “no” and [then] the teacher would discuss it.

Another participant sighed, “More permissions in Pakistan.... You need permission even to walk up to her desk!” In addition, when a student fulfills the demands of deference, other students may assume that teachers are favoring that student. Some students also use avoidance rituals in the classroom to show deference. “I got scared when she used to come in our classroom. I used to hide or bend down. I never used to answer and tried to avoid eye contact with her,” explained one participant.

In Canadian schools, teachers’ demands for deference are different. While students need permission to leave the classroom, they do not necessarily stand up to greet their teachers. They also feel confident to talk to their teachers and discuss their concerns. Participants also mentioned that teachers do not object to discussions among students.

All the participants emphasized that teachers in Canadian classrooms have noticeably different demeanors than teachers in Pakistan. The following two participant comments illustrate their perceptions of their teachers in Pakistan. “There teachers barely smiled and would just stand and stare.... I don’t know, over there I was just afraid of them, and they are friendlier here.” “Sometimes their faces were scary. Like a strict face.... They would not smile at all.” One participant explained this difference in this way: “Canadians are more open, and Pakistanis are not. You need to know them more before they talk.”

In Canadian and Pakistani classrooms, teachers behave differently, and their behaviors are accepted by parents and are largely legitimized by their society. In other words, schools offer what is demanded by their society. To be successful in Canadian schools, female students who have learned the ways of deference and demeanor of Pakistani society need time and support from their families, teachers, and friends to learn new social norms and gain confidence. This confidence makes a huge difference in their day-to-day learning.

Sensemaking

After immigrant students arrive in new settings, they are surrounded by new people—teachers and peers. Within that new social context, they are continuously making sense of their new circumstances and their own participation in them. They have limited understanding of this new context, and progressive environments/situations and new social norms cannot be taught in classrooms.

I found during the interviews that participants perceived the basic structures and procedures of school systems as similar, although they found teachers' reactions to procedures and implementation of policies to be different. Hence, the process of sensemaking begins when immigrant students arrive in their new classrooms and start finding similarities and differences (Weick et al., 2005) between these contexts and their earlier environments. I suggest four stages for this sensemaking process.

Stage 1: Assuring

Immigrant students are mainly nervous not because of a fear of the unknown. Rather, they are nervous because of the known—their previous schooling experiences. One participant explained, “On the first day, when I came here, I was shy ... scared. I was like, ‘What if teacher is not nice here as well?’ I was shy about other kids’ opinions on me.”

In progressive Canadian classrooms, immigrant students find the teachers to be more open and approachable. One participant shared, “No, teachers were very nice, I was so nervous on the first day, but when I saw the teachers and the friendly atmosphere, and the way they were talking politely, all my tension was gone.”

Immigrant students generally did not enjoy their prior schooling experiences, and they arrived in their new schools with apprehensions based on those experiences. I

would suggest that the first phase is “assuring,” as students are relieved and enjoy the initial process of acclimating to their new schools. They do not pay particular attention to the differences, and they do not fully use the resources available to them. I would also suggest that the assuring phase could take from a few days to a few weeks and is succeeded by a “struggling” phase.

Stage 2: Struggling

After becoming familiar with their new schools, classrooms, and teachers, immigrant students start recognizing the skills that they lack by comparing themselves continuously with other students or to expectations of teachers. “I think, I didn’t enjoy because I understood a little about the language. In grade 6, I got French and I could not understand anything the teacher used to say,” shared one participant. Other participant responses revealed that students faced difficulty with making new friends or simply playing a new sport in physical education.

Female immigrant students reported struggling with peer pressure. One participant said, “Clothing did matter a bit in my class, because I used to hear these girls talked behind my back and I actually heard them say, ‘What is she wearing? She does

not know how to dress.” Another shared, “I was scared if I say something wrong and if they are like ‘no that’s wrong’ so I was scared of putting my opinion out there.”

Working independently also emerged as an important issue for participants. They constantly struggled to make sense of their new environment, looking for cues and using their reasoning, all while “playing the game” (Ancona, 2012). They unlearned or adjusted their previous understandings of interactions, deference, and policy interpretations in this phase, which could extend to a few weeks or until some form of intervention is offered.

Stage 3: Harnessing

The first two stages of this sensemaking process were about awareness; this stage is about action. In the harnessing phase, immigrant students, still experiencing anxiety, start working on two aspects: exploring available resources and building and improving on their new skills.

Participants shared their own strategies to use resources and described relying on their own means if proper guidelines were absent. One participant explicitly asked for help: “I asked the students, they used to explain, and I learned.” Another participant was shy, and tried to understand by observing others: “Well, I did not like [it at first]. I noticed some students that were in my class and teachers were impressed by them, so I just did like them ... like did my homework and assignments on time.” Immigrant students may adopt various ways to improve their skills. As one student explained, “I read it over and over. Every person has a different way, so I repeated in my mind, or wrote it down sometimes.” Another student shared, “I was not getting good results in volleyball, but I made it by running, so there is a choice you can make.”

One participant mentioned the struggle and resolved it by dedicating more time and effort, while another participant managed by negotiation and accommodation. For these immigrant students, their teachers, parents, and friends are resources to get help, guidance, and support. Though confused at the beginning, these students are steadier toward the end of this stage. The time taken by each student is unique, depending on the personality of the student, the desired skills, and the people and resources available to them. Hence, sensemaking in schools draws on informal relationships (new friendships) in addition to the formal relationships (teacher-student relationships).

Role of teachers. Participants reported that their Canadian teachers encouraged them to be more independent. They mentioned research assignments, homework worksheets, and group work as key factors which facilitated their success. In day-to-day activities, these student-centred environments allowed freer movement, chatting, and

interaction (Davies & Guppy, 2010). Further, teachers' demeanors in Canadian classrooms are receptive, and they deliver knowledge, procedures, and rules.

Participants shared, however, that their teachers could not help them to understand their new environments and the hidden rules. The students remained unsure if a teacher could be the right person to solve their personal concerns since their previous school experiences and images of teachers did not allow them to seek this resource fully.

Role of friends. Immigrant students informally learned about their new classrooms through their friends. A participant mentioned that friends helped him to learn the social norms as "sometimes the unspoken rules everyone knows but they don't talk about.... I learned that, I learned how to act, what the social norm is." Overall, participants had mixed views on their new friends. Some participants found it easy to make friends, while others found it difficult. Sometimes they found new friends in the playgrounds, and sometimes friends introduced more friends: "We both were from Pakistan and it was my first day and his second year or third ... so he knew how it was like and we had the same first name and the last name ... which was funny. He introduced me to his other friends." A female participant described her experience in this way:

Here, friends have a lot of attitude. Whatever they say, they make it an ego problem. If there is a quarrel, then they just end the friendship. There, we also had issues, but we never showed such attitudes.... We solved the issues and said sorry. There we had one or two friends, but here we have groups. It is very difficult to enter in a group like every person has a different nature and you do not know what they are thinking. [Here] we do say hello-hi but are not good friends.

Another female participant shared her experience becoming friends with another girl from Pakistan: "I also made my best friend from this [ESL] group who also came from Pakistan and who also had the same problems as me. She was shy of going in front of the teachers and presenting."

One respondent explained the motivation for students' choices in making friends as, "students want to be friends with smart people and those who are troublemakers they want to be friends with troublemakers." Making friends is easier if students share some common attributes such as language skills or country or even the same name. They also recognize that sometimes they need to have special skills for friendship, which might be why smart students do not initiate friendships with troublemakers or old students with newcomers. Further, once an immigrant student realizes that the other student is like him or her, or lacks the same skills, the student feels relaxed.

Role of parents. The role of parents as a resource is dual in nature. Although parents exercise their traditional authority, students still seek their help in new situations. One participant mentioned, “Basically if I don’t understand, my dad is always there.” On scoring poor grades, a participant shared, “I have to go to tuitions [tutoring], and probably my parents won’t let me use internet. My dad would probably sit down and check the units I am getting bad grades on.” Another student shared that his parents conveyed their expectation “to get good marks,” but the student knew that they meant “the top half of the class.” Another participant differentiated between his parents and his friends’ parents:

I think some ways parents who are born here are more ... liberal. They are more liberal with rules and stuff and are more open minded I guess. You can say they have looser rules but they still have expectations ... and that is because of the culture.

One participant stated explicitly that parents create and convey expectations by constantly reminding them of their immigration experiences: “Our parents are like, ‘Oh we came here because of your education,’ so they do have a pressure of all that while people already living here don’t have that much pressure.” While these parents have less understanding of their children’s new school systems and their procedures, they listen and encourage their children by talking, showing care, and conveying their high expectations.

Parents expectations also influence students’ friendships in their schools, as a participant shared: “Well ... hmm ... I don’t know.... He was a troublemaker, and my parents had told me to avoid those kinds of people so I just became friends with others.” This quote also suggests that these parents unconsciously put their students under more stress by pushing them farther in the competition. Furthermore, making intelligent decisions (such as making smart friends) as per parents’ desires may not be the preferred choices for the students.

Stage 4: Reassuring

Immigrant students, after acknowledging their skills and lack of skills and accessing available resources, gain confidence and start enjoying their new schools. A female participant shared, “Initially I found it hard to go to school all alone, it was very far to walk because in Pakistan we had a school van. But then I thought if I don’t become independent, I will not do anything.”

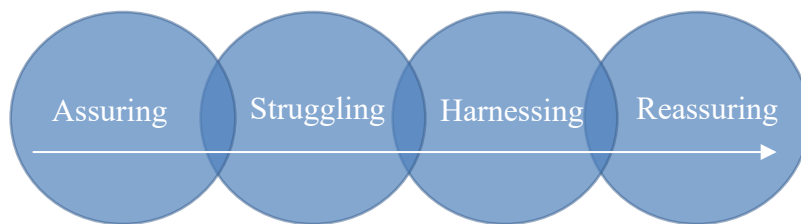
Participants’ responses suggested that they gradually learn the ways of their new schools and start adjusting well. Reaching at this stage does not suggest that after

settling in new classrooms these students will achieve high scores in academics, but they will be more confident and able to enjoy their learning experiences.

The four stages of sensemaking for these students are depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Linear Stages of Sensemaking



Conclusion

Students in traditional schools in Pakistan develop compliance without questioning school policy and teacher authority. Their parents reinforce this idea of respect by legitimizing schools' policies. After immigration to Canada, students do not receive formal guidelines on what is important and what can be ignored while settling in their new, progressive environment.

Female students in particular struggle with understanding progressive interactions since they were taught different expectations of deference and demeanor to gain respect. After being encouraged to be "reserved," they are now being encouraged to be more "natural" in their ways of talking, dressing, or thinking. Pakistani female immigrant students require approvals from their mothers and families to wear appropriate clothing to classrooms or to study with their friends, which shapes their confidence and decision-making skills. Further, the concept of private and public space in Pakistani society also affects their interactions with people, teachers or friends alike, outside their homes.

Immigrant parents aspire for successful futures for their children, yet focusing strictly on academic grades does not make for successful schooling experiences. If teachers are familiar with the demands of deference in traditional schools, they can support immigrant students in their new classrooms. Students might do well in academics as their parents encourage them, but teachers could collaborate with parents

and help in listening to these girls' voices and building their confidence. Once immigrant students pass the fourth stage of sensemaking, they may choose to incorporate their progressive learning experiences into their previous traditional teachings and may develop their own conceptualizations of authority and deference. Parents, by providing them with opportunities to experiment and with greater freedom to explore the world, can yield tremendous benefits since this will shift their role from an authority figure to an intelligent adult supervisor who can influence them in an authoritative manner in apposite way (Furedi, 2009).

Acknowledgment

I express my sincere thanks to Professor Scott Davies, Program Coordinator, Educational Leadership and Policy Program at Ontario Institute for Studies, University of Toronto, for his supervision, valuable advice, and constant support for this research project.

References

- Ancona, D. (2012). Sensemaking: Framing and acting in the unknown. In S. Snook, N. Nohria, & R. Khurana (Eds.), *The handbook for teaching leadership: Knowing, doing, and being* (pp. 3-21). Sage.
- Areepattamannil, S., & Freeman, J. G. (2008). Academic achievement, academic self-concept, and academic motivation of immigrant adolescents in the greater Toronto area secondary schools. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 19(4), 700-743. <https://doi.org/10.4219/jaa-2008-831>
- Asanova, J. (2005). Educational experiences of immigrant students from the former Soviet Union: A case study of an ethnic school in Toronto. *Educational Studies*, 31(2), 181-195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055690500095589>
- Avila, J., & Wilson, J. (2011). *K-12 education: Opportunities and strategies for Ontario entrepreneurs*. MaRS Market Insights. <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/27648254/ka12-educationmars-discovery-district>
- Axelrod, P. (1997). *The promise of schooling education in Canada, 1800-1914*. University of Toronto Press.
- Axelrod, P. (2011). Banning the strap: The end of corporal punishment in Canadian schools. *Education Canada*, 51(1), 39-41. <https://www.edcan.ca/articles/banning-the-strap-the-end-of-corporalpunishment-in-canadian-schools/>
- Bashiruddin, A. (2018). *Teacher development and teacher education in developing countries: On becoming and being a teacher*. Springer.
- Chow, H. P. (2007). Sense of belonging and life satisfaction among Hong Kong adolescent immigrants in Canada. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 33(3), 511-520. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830701234830>
- Christou, T. (2012). *Progressive education revisioning and reframing Ontario's public schools, 1919-1942*. University of Toronto Press.
- City of Toronto. (2016). *Neighbourhood profile: Thorncliffe Park*. <https://www.toronto.ca/ext/sdfa/Neighbourhood%20Profiles/pdf/2016/pdf1/cpa55.pdf>
- Cooper, M., & Cooper, G. (2008). *Overcoming barriers to the positive development and engagement of ethno-racial minority youth in Canada* (pp. 446-469). Department of Canadian Heritage, Alberta District.

xxx

- <https://eslaction.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Background-DocumentYouth-Framework-3.pdf>
- Critelli, F. M. (2010). Beyond the veil in Pakistan. *Affilia*, 25(3), 236-249.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109910375204>
- Davies, S., & Guppy, N. (2010). *The schooled society: An introduction to the sociology of education* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Desai, S., & Subramanian, S. (2000). *Colour, culture and dual consciousness: Issues identified by South Asian immigrant youth in the Greater Toronto Area*. Council of Agencies Serving South Asians and South Asian Women's Centre.
http://atwork.settlement.org/downloads/CASSA_Youth_Report.pdf
- Emme, M. J., Kirova, A., Kamau, O., & Kosanovich, S. (2006). Ensemble research: A means for immigrant children to explore peer relationships through fotonovela. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 52(3), 160-181. <https://www.learntechlib.org/p/71336/>
- Furedi, F. (2009). *Wasted: Why education isn't educating*. Continuum.
- Goffman, E. (1956). The nature of deference and demeanor. *American Anthropologist*, 58(3), 473-502.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1956.58.3.02a00070>
- Haque, R. (2010). Gender and nexus of purdah culture in public policy. *South Asian Studies*, 25(2), 303-310.
<http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/csas/PDF/07-Dr.%20Riffat%20Haque.pdf>
- Institute of Social and Policy Sciences. (n.d.). *Eighteenth constitutional amendment: Federal and provincial responsibilities in education*.
http://aserpakistan.org/document/learning_resources/2014/18th_Amendment_Federal_and_Provincial_Responsibilities_in_Education.pdf
- Klassen, R. M. (2004). A cross-cultural investigation of the efficacy beliefs of South Asian immigrant and Anglo Canadian nonimmigrant early adolescents. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 96(4), 731-742.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.96.4.731>

Ladky, M., & Peterson, S. S. (2008). Successful practices for immigrant parent involvement: An Ontario perspective. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 10(2), 8289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960801997932>

Lee, J. W., & Hébert, Y. M. (2006). The meaning of being Canadian: A comparison between youth of immigrant and non-immigrant

International Journal of Student Voice Vol. x No. x

origins. *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, 29(2), 497-520. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20054174>

Li, J. (2010). "My home and my school": Examining immigrant adolescent narratives from the critical sociocultural perspective. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 13(1), 119-137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320903550154>

Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Mathews, R. (2000). Cultural patterns of South Asian and Southeast Asian Americans. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 36(2), 101-104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105345120003600205>

Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training. (n.d.). *Organogram*. <http://mofept.gov.pk/Detail/MTM2MjU3MDctYWZkMC00MzJmLTlhZjMtNmNIZTA4YThiOTgx>

Pakistan: Administration, finance, educational research. (n.d.). *Education encyclopedia*. <https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1147/Pakistan->

Statistics Canada/Statistique Canada. (2008). *Children of immigrants: How well do they do in school?* <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/81-004x/200410/7422-eng.htm>

Thorncliffe Park. (n.d.). *Toronto neighbourhood guide*. <https://www.torontoneighbourhoods.net/neighbourhoods/east york/thorncliffe-park>

Weick, K. (1976). Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21(1), 1-19. doi:10.2307/2391875

Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409-421. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0133>

Weber, M., & Miller, S. M. (1963). *Max Weber: Selections from his work*. Crowell.

Xu, S., Connelly, F. M., He, M. F., & Phillion, J. (2007). Immigrant students' experience of schooling: A narrative inquiry theoretical framework. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 39(4), 399-422.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270601148144>

Yau, M., Rosolen, L., & Archer, B. (2013). *2011-12 Student & Parent Census*. Toronto District School Board.

xxx

<https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/AboutUs/Research/2011-12CensusFactSheet1-Demographics-17June2013.pdf>

Yoo, C. S., & Miller, L. D. (2011). Culture and parenting: Psychological adjustment among Chinese Canadian adolescents. *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy/Revue canadienne de counseling et de psychothérapie*, 45(1), 34-52. <https://cjc-rcc.ucalgary.ca/article/view/59278>