

Inclusive Storytelling: Immigrant Experiences and Community Reaction in Georgia

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Abstract

Through examination of a multiyear, interdisciplinary, qualitative, community-based participatory research project that began in 2017, this paper explores the role of storytelling in the transference of knowledge, history, and sense of purpose. Storytelling is important for both the storyteller and those who receive stories, creating an emotional connection and compelling listeners and readers to action. To inform and shape the narrative regarding contemporary U.S. immigration, we embarked on a storytelling project through a university-community partnership. The storytellers were immigrant students whose stories were featured in the 2018 and 2019 editions of the book *Green Card Youth Voices: Immigration Stories From an Atlanta High School*. While the project initially focused on producing a published collection of stories and creating opportunities for public engagement, its larger aim was to connect a young group of Atlantans to each other for deeper exploration around immigration. Two research questions shape this paper: (a) What do we know about young immigrant Atlantans' perceptions of their own immigration experiences? and (b) What effect does exposure to individual immigration stories have on community members? This paper examines how community-based service-learning initiatives create new visions for civic engagement and what research methods help us ascertain community impact and opinion. We assert that inclusive storytelling from both positions (i.e., story-teller and story-hearer) is vital for improved and more inclusive immigrant integration.

The United States is a major immigration hub that has received waves of migrants from all over the world throughout its history. The U.S. population grew from 3.9 million people in 1790 (though the first census excluded Native Americans; U.S. Census Bureau, 1791), to over 331 million in 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Much of this growth has been from immigration; according to the 2021 American Community Survey, there are approximately 45.3 million foreign-born residents in the United States, constituting 13.6% of the total population. Immigration is an inextricable part of the U.S. story and experience. A report from the U.S. Census Bureau (Anderson & Hemez, 2022) estimated that one in four (26.3%) children living in the United States under the age of 18 has at least one foreign-born parent. These numbers are indicative of the customs and traditions that make up the cultural mosaic of the United States and point to the different cultural spheres that migrant children and adults navigate every day. Thus, it is not surprising that immigration raises questions surrounding racial, ethnic, and national identity for both newcomers and host communities. Community engagement initiatives support recognition and understanding of

these differences and aim to create an inclusive environment for newcomers through support of the local community, which in turn strengthens the entire community (Huang & Liu, 2018).

Much of the research surrounding the immigrant experience—and subsequent policy recommendations and narrative construction—is overwhelmingly done by others. We seldom hear from immigrants directly; their individual voices are rarely featured prominently in the debate on immigration. The Green Card Voices (GCV) project seeks to change that by providing a platform for immigrants to share their individual stories in their own words. Since 2017, this multiyear, interdisciplinary, qualitative project has incorporated a community-based participatory research (CBPR) methodology that explores the integral role of storytelling in the transference of knowledge, history, and sense of purpose. This is important not only for the storyteller but also for those who receive and are impacted by stories. Stories capture our attention, create an emotional connection, and compel us to act (Zak, 2012). To inform, and possibly shape, the narrative regarding contemporary U.S. immigration, we embarked on an immigrant storytelling project through a university-community partnership.

Based on stories told by youth immigrants who spent their high school years in Atlanta, Georgia, a major emerging immigrant gateway metropolitan region (Singer, 2015) and a “twenty-first-century gateway” (Singer et al., 2008) in the southeastern United States, we analyze identity struggles and transformative identity processes. Such 21st-century gateways, including the Austin, Charlotte, Las Vegas, Orlando, and Phoenix metropolitan areas, are characterized by high growth rates of foreign-born populations in recent decades as compared to immigrant destinations of the past as well as suburban immigrant settlement patterns throughout the metropolitan region (McDaniel and Rodriguez, 2024; McDaniel 2021).

The young immigrants included in this project comprise a wide variety of immigration statuses, countries of origin, ages, and time spent in the United States. They shared their individual stories of coming and settling in the United States as part of the published edited volume *Green Card Youth Voices: Immigration Stories From an Atlanta High School* (2018). This book provides us with a unique look into the individual struggles, challenges, motivations, and perception changes of young immigrants. The storytellers shared their published stories at various venues throughout the Atlanta metropolitan region in 2018 and 2019.¹ After selected public programs, members of the audience were invited to participate in a survey, as part of an IRB-approved research protocol by Kennesaw State University, to capture their reactions and insights.

Two key research questions shape this paper: (a) What do we know about young immigrant Atlantans’ perceptions of their own immigration experiences? and (b) What effect does exposure to individual immigration stories have on community members? Building from the published book, the results reveal how university-community partnerships can have a significant impact on topics of global awareness, immigration, civic engagement, and leadership training. As such, this paper examines how community-based service-learning initiatives can create new visions for civic engagement and which research methodologies can help us ascertain community impact and opinion. We assert that inclusive storytelling from both positions (i.e., story-teller and story-hearer) is vital for improved

immigrant integration, specifically and more broadly, in designing an innovative and inclusive future for all of Atlanta’s residents.

Immigrant Integration and Identity

At their core, debates around how newcomers integrate into society aim to foster, analyze, and sometimes question the development of new emergent host-country identities. Identity tensions and transitions typically occur during adolescence and early adulthood. They also occur during and as the cause of life-changing events—ranging from career changes to the loss of a loved one—and help the individual adapt to changing circumstances (Schwartz et al., 2018). Immigration is arguably a life-changing event that can reshape many aspects of an immigrant’s life, and emergence of a host-country identity helps the immigrant navigate the new cultural context and settle into their new environment (Kumar et al., 2015).

Tensions between the new identity and the preexisting cultural identity can be stressful but are a natural byproduct of the immigrant experience. Feelings of being in between or losing a connection to one’s original cultural identity are parts of the transitional phase of identity tensions and identity development (Cohen & Kassan, 2018). Cohen and Kassan (2018), in their study on emerging identities in adult immigrants in Canada, introduced the model of cultural identity negotiation. The core category of their model, One’s Motivation and Sense of Agency to Negotiate Cultural Identity, consists of four external and two internal higher-order categories that connect to either the culture of origin or the host-country culture. These categories are (1) Family and Cultural Rigidity, (2) Connections Specific to Place, (3) Connection to a Same-Cultured Community, (4) Sense of Permanency, (5) Desire to Preserve Culture of Origin, and (6) Desire to Fit into Culture. Cohen and Kassan (2018) found that the relations and interplay between these six categories significantly determine the core category and result in different types of identity. They found that dual, blended, and disconnected identities all draw on aspects from both cultures but vary in how they manifest. Such liminal experiences are particularly acute for immigrant youth as they navigate rapidly changing integration and receptivity contexts and landscapes at the local, state, and federal

¹ The authors of this paper were involved in the planning and production of the book in addition to the community engagement and dissemination efforts.

levels (Silver, 2018). But does developing a host-country identity necessarily mean giving up one's original cultural identity?

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) holds that individuals draw on a host of different group identities (e.g., national, religious, and linguistic). Developing an additional cultural identity can be a stressful process, and there are vast differences in the duration, depth, comfort, and extent to which immigrants develop and embrace a new host-country identity and retain or adjust their original cultural identity (see Fleischmann & Phalet, 2016; Shams, 2017). Some immigrants appear to blend seamlessly into their new communities and navigate new customs and traditions quickly. Others struggle to adjust or prefer to retain their original cultural identities exclusively and actively avoid exploring the host-country culture.

Several studies indicate that congruence between self-definition and assumptions of how the host-country community perceives the immigrant group is an indicator for host-country identity development (Heilbrunn et al., 2016; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Specifically, negative stereotypes and other types of discrimination have been found to constrain host-country identity development among immigrant youth (Schwartz et al., 2018). Ethnic enclaves often form because they provide a space where rules and customs are known; thus, these enclaves provide a familiar space. In the case of Atlanta—and other Sunbelt metropolitan regions, twenty-first century gateways (Singer et al., 2008), and ethnoburbs (Li, 2008)—immigrants can often mitigate the initial culture shock but also prolong or even prevent integration into the host culture (Rudolph, 2018). In the most extreme cases, this can lead to so-called “parallel societies” in which a minority group occupies a separate spatial and cultural place in society while substantially minimizing contact and interaction with the majority culture (Heitmeyer, 1996).

Understanding Identities

All social identities are fluid and constantly constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. Hall (1990) defined identity as “a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (p. 222). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) argues that there is a significant relationship among group membership, sense of self, and self-esteem. Individuals derive their self-conception (i.e., their identity) from

social and personal identity. While social identity consists of various group identities that inform an individual's attitudes, values, and beliefs, personal identity is based on an individual's achievements and personality traits (Rodriguez, 2018). These various social and personal identities can complement and compete with one another. Cultural identity is a complex sub-identity that is based on ethnic and cultural customs, traditions, practices, and values. Multiple studies find cultural identity to be most salient among minority groups that routinely traverse different cultural contexts and thus actively engage and reevaluate these different cultural environments and their own place in them (Phinney et al., 2006; Schwartz et al., 2014; Syed & Azmitia, 2009). Furthermore, the nature of identity tensions is also determined by the relationship and level of coexistence between the past and the present in terms of identity (Ali et al., 2017).

Depending on how a particular population is racialized, immigrants traditionally represent a cultural minority in the host country, which likely transforms their cultural identity into a more salient group identity. *Acculturation* is the cultural identity process during which one modifies or replaces elements of one's native culture to resemble the host-country society more closely (Schwartz et al., 2010). Internalizing various cultures and building one's identity on values and customs of multiple cultures is often the result of routinely navigating distinct cultural environments (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005). The acculturation process can lead to one of two possible dual identities: hyphenated or hybrid (Asher, 2008; Bhabha, 1994; Fleischmann & Phalet, 2016; Lang, 2005). Research has found that the emergence of either type of identity can have beneficial effects. For the individual, the emergence of a host-culture identity supports the integration process and relieves some of the psychological stress immigrants experience while being immersed in a new culture and settling down in a country, as it provides a sense of belonging and a feeling of connectedness with the host community (Ngyuen & Benet-Martinez, 2013). In addition, relations with the receiving community can significantly influence the immigrant experience both negatively and positively.

Individual Identities and Intergroup Relations

Dovidio et al. (2007) found that intergroup relations (i.e., relations between host and immigrant communities) improve significantly

with emergent dual identities among immigrants when the immigrants perceive the host community to value and respect their other significant sub-identities. Further, meaningful contact has been shown to improve intergroup relations and make immigrants feel like part of their new community (Jones & Rutland, 2018; Martiny et al., 2017; Tropp et al., 2018). Social networks are a key component of social capital (Branker, 2017; Ryan et al., 2008). Building new social networks in the host country can significantly benefit immigrants, most notably by providing increased awareness of and access to different resources (Leonard, 2004). When paired with agency, social capital can increase social mobility (Dominguez, 2011).

In contrast, “network fragmentation” can be the result of distinct immigrant identities and corresponding distinct social circles (Bauder, 2005; Kazemipur, 2006). This often comes with code-switching—using different accents, dialects, vocabulary combinations, and mannerisms within social groups—as a strategy to present oneself based on situational context (Wilson, 2009). Network fragmentation is often seen as an obstacle to successful integration because it assumes that some network ties are too weak to benefit the immigrant and that strong network ties may potentially restrict access to new information or resources (Branker, 2017; Foster & Meinhard, 2005). Valenta (2009), in contrast, has found that immigrants strategically use network fragmentation to cope with identity tensions and stigmatization of their original identity in the host community. This coping mechanism, he concludes, is a necessity for integration because it provides separate spaces with different social codes and expectations. The network that corresponds to the culture of origin allows the immigrant to maintain that identity with only minor changes. Interactions with the host community network allow immigrants to develop a host-country identity without feeling that they are losing their original identity.

Individual identities and intergroup relations are of growing importance for high school students, especially for those who are college- and career-bound (D. X. Rodriguez et al., 2019; S. Rodriguez & Rodriguez, 2020). As the young immigrants increasingly explore their environment independently, internal identity tensions are likely to arise. The desire to preserve their original cultural identity can compete with the perceived need or desire to “fit” into the new culture and emergent social circles. In their study on ethnic, national, and dual identities among

Turkish-origin high school students in Germany, Martiny et al. (2017) found meaningful contact with other Germans to be the biggest contributor to the emergence of German national and dual (Turkish-German) identities. Other studies (Allat, 1993; Lauglo, 2000; Obsiye & Cook, 2016) have found that the children’s education is often the focus of migrating parents and that immigrant youth therefore often feel a sense of obligation and pressure to perform well to increase the family’s potential for social mobility. Schwartz et al. (2013) found acculturation to be linked with personal identity exploration among immigrant college youth. Part of this process is reflecting on both cultures’ customs and values and choosing to commit to certain aspects of either or both cultures. This “selective acculturation” suggests that individuals have agency over which aspects of each culture they want to retain or acquire.

Schwartz et al. (2010) held that acculturation takes place in three different spheres: cultural practices, cultural values, and cultural identifications. Cultural practices for individuals with dual identities include maintaining and learning the languages representative of one’s cultural heritage and of the host country. Further, choices of friends, romantic partners, and even media representative of both cultures influence and represent cultural practices. Cultural values refer to individualism and collectivism. Finally, cultural identifications represent the extent to which one has a sense of belonging and attachment to both respective cultures. Learning English can be a component of adapting cultural practices in the United States, whether those new language skills are acquired purely out of necessity or are used to develop and engage in meaningful relationships with members of the host community, in which case new language skills would be part of the cultural identification sphere.

The Importance of Storytelling

In their survey of the magnitude of engagement between community organizations and immigrant newcomers in Ontario, Canada, George and Selimos (2018) argued that a narrative approach to community-based action research is valuable. To examine the effectiveness of narrative research, they conducted narrative interviews with community stakeholders and immigrants with the purpose of supporting how immigrant newcomers are welcomed and accepted. Furthermore, Iwasaki (2015) claimed that creating opportunities for youth to be leaders in community engagement

with the support of community agency partners has an incredible impact on their development and increases their likelihood of civic engagement. Iwasaki (2015) shed positive light on the collaboration between youth community leaders, community partners, and university researchers. By sharing reflections from the different collaborative parties, the author used their voices to show the beneficial effects of civic involvement on marginalized youth, including empowerment, social cohesion, leadership development, educational attainment, critical thinking and problem-solving, political efficacy, reduced risk behaviors, and community development.

Romero (2013) asserted that storytelling and narration can enhance collaborative partnerships intended to build global awareness and community involvement. In particular, narration permits the cultivation of new understandings about minoritized experiences, including those of immigrants and refugees in this case, and allows students to learn by community engagement (Romero, 2013). This work encouraged other educators to embark on partnerships that reveal unique ways to create community-based learning opportunities. Our project allowed educators to partner with a nonprofit working with community members to not only advance learning for all students but also advocate for the stories of immigrants and their families. These same stories were later shared with the community by way of public events, as described below.

University-community partnership research is critical to advancing understanding of certain issues. Glover and Silk (2013) suggested that partnerships and community engagement are tied to the university's goal to educate, inform, and reshape the public's perspective. Leisey, Holton, and Davey (2012) highlighted the importance of gathering empirical evidence to thoroughly analyze the impact of university-community partnerships on both the university and community partners. Based on their research at Virginia Commonwealth University, they suggested that universities' funding of community engagement projects has an extremely positive influence on those who are involved. Their work adds to the conversation about the benefits of involving students in community engagement projects and the value of sound university-community partnerships. Such benefits include hands-on learning, skill development, cultivation of civic responsibility, networking opportunities, and personal growth.

In another example, Mileski, Mohamed, and Hunter (2014) analyzed a community-university partnership called the Hartland Partnership Center. They showed how the partnership among eight community organizations and 10 university departments effectively engaged individuals in the community and maintained their motivation to remain actively involved within the partnership. This partnership offered programs and services to refugee and immigrant individuals in Salt Lake City, Utah. In their qualitative study, they illustrated ways the partnership could effectively create a more inclusive leadership model, sustain vigor and drive toward developing community awareness and efficiency, and help immigrants and refugees overcome social and economic barriers.

Yamamura and Koth (2019) claimed that place-based community engagement (PBCE) allows community-university partnerships to be more effective and valuable through its focus on distinct geographic locations. The authors outlined a research study that demonstrates PBCE's positive influence on the competency of community engagement professionals (CEPs). They highlighted the components of this specific form of community engagement and ways it enhances civic skills. They argued that their work can inform not only PBCEs but also all CEPs who are interested in furthering their knowledge and avenues of community engagement. By grounding our work in understanding the role of immigrant integration and identity formation as well as intergroup relations, we see how storytelling can forge community-university partnerships that both inform and facilitate immigrant integration.

Methodology and Study Area

Our overall methodology is situated within a CBPR framework (Anderson et al., 2001; Archer-Kuhn & Grant, 2014; Rodriguez & McDaniel, 2019; Schiele & Krummaker, 2011; Smith et al., 2016; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2009) involving a multi-year, interdisciplinary university-community partnership. This paper's two research questions are: (a) What do we know about young immigrant Atlantans' perceptions of their own immigration experiences? and (b) What effect does exposure to individual immigration stories have on community members? The partners included three university faculty researchers coming from the disciplines of English, geography, and social work/human services, each of whom had participated in a community engagement faculty learning

community at their university; a nonprofit organization (Minneapolis-based GCV, which produces the *Green Card Voices* book series focused on the stories of U.S. immigrants); and three public high schools in DeKalb County, Georgia, one of the urban-inner suburban core counties within the sprawling Atlanta metropolitan region.

CBPR is an established method for making research more relevant to practice, reconciling the worldviews of practitioners and researchers, and identifying community-driven needs and developing applied solutions to addressing those needs (Anderson et al., 2001; Archer-Kuhn & Grant, 2014; Schiele & Krummaker, 2011; Smith, Schuch, & Hernandez, 2016; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2009). CBPR is scientific inquiry conducted in communities in which community members, persons affected by the issues under study, and other key community stakeholders can be full participants in each phase of the work: conception, design, conduct, analysis, interpretation, and communication of results (Smith et al., 2016). CBPR is a natural fit for community-university partnership research because it relies on trusting and respectful relationships based upon mutual interests, which can deepen levels of collaboration, foster transparent and authentic communication, and engender respect for the diverse perspectives and organizational orientations (Archer-Kuhn & Grant, 2014). This method widens theoretical knowledge by elevating experiential knowledge sometimes absent within academic literature. By valuing researchers and practitioners equally, CBPR deepens researchers' sensitivities and increases their ability to reflect on how their values and orientation to the project inform their decision-making. This further informs co-inquiry and allows partners to move beyond surface level goals and build a path for continual partnerships (Banks et al., 2014).

From a PBCE perspective, we chose the Atlanta region for this project for several reasons. First, except for the GCV organization, we are all based in the Atlanta region, making the CBPR methodology workable; in addition, the research team members are invested in applied research that benefits our region and its communities. Second, Atlanta's status as a new immigrant gateway destination (Singer, 2015) makes it a suitable location for research on issues regarding immigration.

This project represents follow-up work to a 2016–2018 project that documented the stories of present-day youth migrants, their journeys, and their experiences in receiving communities, which resulted in the May 2018 publication of *Green Card Youth Voices: Immigration Stories From an Atlanta High School*. This is the fourth book in the GCV youth series, which features personal essays written by high school immigrants from different U.S. cities. The Atlanta-based book, the first to focus on a southeastern U.S. city, includes stories of over 20 immigrants from 15 countries, including Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Mexico, and Vietnam. The applied outcomes of this project helped GCV implement similar book projects and public outreach throughout the United States utilizing CBPR as a methodology. The outcomes also informed our understanding of how immigrant-receiving communities' views of migrant communities may change over time. This could inform the work of organizations such as Welcoming America (www.welcomingamerica.org) that are implementing initiatives to cultivate more welcoming and inclusive cities and metropolitan regions throughout the country (Hyde et al., 2023; McDaniel et al., 2017; McDaniel et al., 2019).

To answer our first research question, we analyzed the essays by young immigrant high school authors in Atlanta who tell their stories of resettlement. We used the qualitative research software NVIVO to code and analyze the data. First, we created 12 classifications for demographic data, including immigration status, gender, country of origin, time in the United States, if student authors came to the United States alone, and if they already had family in the United States. We used simple statistics to summarize the key demographics of student authors (see Table 1). Of the 25 students, 15 were female and 10 were male. However, four of their stories were not published in the book due to concerns over anti-immigrant policies that were rampant during the project. As the stories are deidentified here, we have included 24 student authors who were enrolled in one of three case study high schools in the Atlanta area at the time of the project; one author was an alumna of one of the schools and at the time was a teacher at her alma mater.

In a second step, we developed codes for qualitative analysis based on the above-introduced model of cultural identity negotiation (Cohen & Kassan, 2018). The following six categories make up the core category and are the measurable components of this model:

Table 1. Demographics of Student Authors

Continents of origin	
Africa	5
North America	9
Asia	11
Gender	
Female	15
Male	10
Arrival from	
Country of origin	19
Secondary country	6
Immigration status	
Refugee	6
Diversity Lottery Green Card	3
Family-sponsored Green Card	5
DACA	9
Citizenship	2

1. Family and Cultural Rigidity: the importance family places on maintaining cultural heritage and values; measured as high, neutral, or flexible

2. Connections Specific to the United States (Canada in the original model): meaningful connections and relations with people, education systems, work, and career prospects in the United States

3. Connection to a Same-Cultured Community: connections to individuals or a group who share similar cultural heritage, including language, religion, food, and traditions

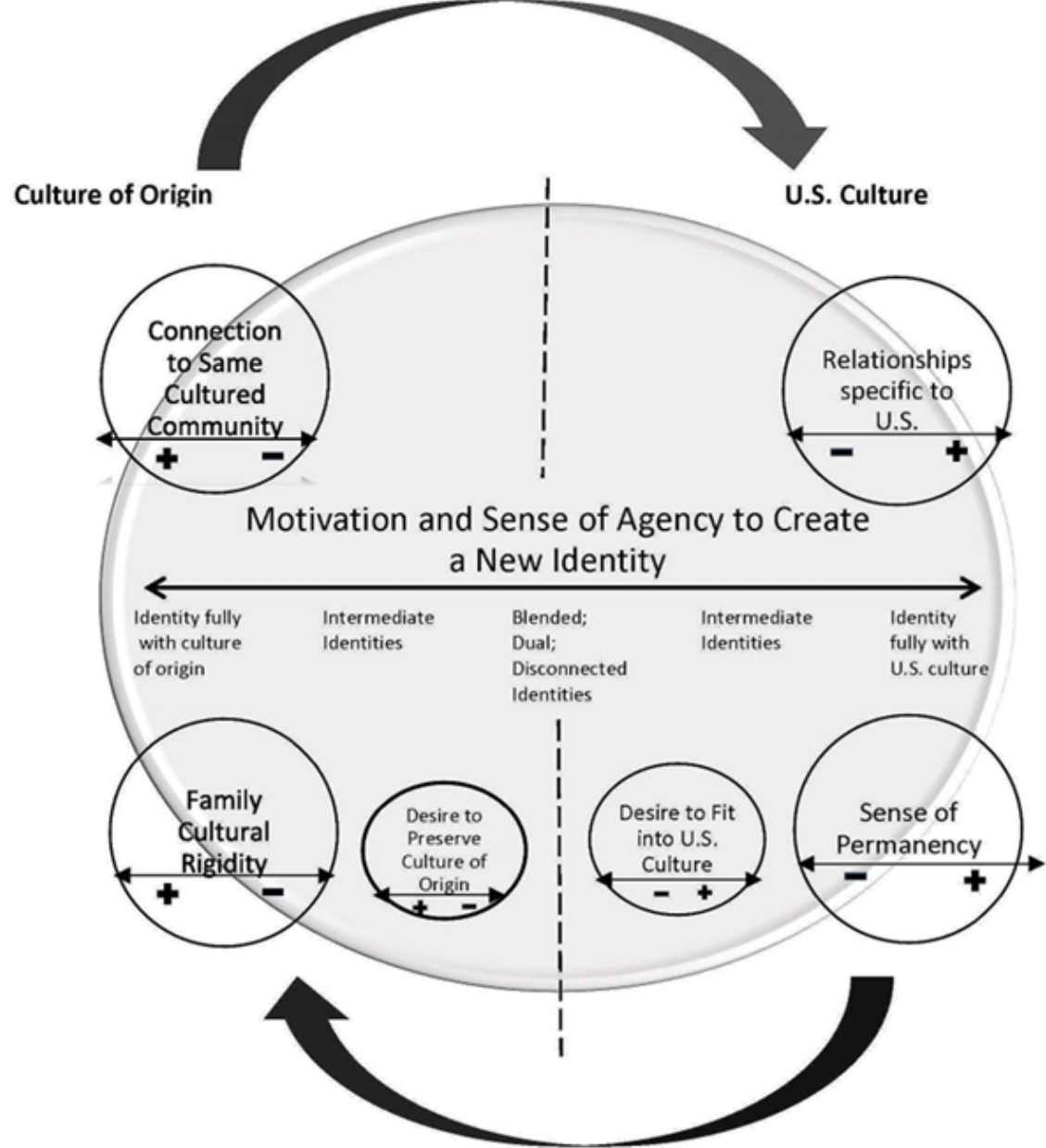
4. Sense of Permanency: a feeling of home and reasonable expectations and ability to belong and stay in the United States; considered in terms of student authors' visa status

5. Desire to Preserve Culture of Origin: the internal desire to connect with the culture of origin and carry the cultural identity into the future, including learning or keeping up language skills; visits to the country of origin; an expressed desire to move back or improve the living situation for the community in the country of origin; and a general desire to learn about the history, customs, and traditions of the culture of origin
6. Desire to Fit in to U.S. Culture (Canadian culture in the original model): the internal sentiment or desire to fit into U.S. culture and taking specific steps to materialize this desire, including learning or improving English; learning about and adjusting to traditions and customs; navigating bureaucratic processes, rules, and regulations; and general adjustment of behavior to fit in

We systematically went through each student essay and assigned specific codes to sections of the essays. This allowed us to then tabulate codes and perform crosstab queries, which show the spread of a code across essays and demographic classifiers.

Regarding the second research question, Harden et al. (2015) illustrate that public events and discussions can impact public perceptions about a particular issue, such as immigration. To assess program impact, we gathered qualitative survey data from attendees at a sample of public events designed to present the immigrant student authors' work and experiences to the broader community. We surveyed attendees at four public events in 2019 (out of a total of 15 public events that we coordinated as part of the dissemination strategy for the Green Card Youth Voices Atlanta project). Table 2 summarizes key demographics of

Figure 1. Model of Cultural Identity Negotiation (MCIN) for emerging adult immigrants, modified from Cohen & Kassan, 2018



survey participants ($n = 49$) for each of the four events, which involved introductions by the faculty researchers and book readings by the student authors at public libraries in Brookhaven and Decatur, at the Kennesaw State University library, and at the South Atlantic Modern Language Association (SAML A) conference held in 2019 in downtown Atlanta.

For instance, those who were interested and already empathetic toward immigrants and the immigrant situation may have been more likely to attend the events in the first place. For this reason, responses were similar and consistent across race and political affiliation, outside of takeaways potentially emphasizing different aspects when it comes to those who were from

Table 2. Overview of Survey Participants by Event

Total participants			Gender (open-ended response)			Age			Race/ethnicity (open-ended response)						
	Freq	%	Female	Male	18–25	26–34	35–49	50–64	65+	Black/African American	White/Caucasian	Asian	Hispanic	Other	
Brookhaven Library event	9	19.1	7	2	4	2	2	1	1	2	4	1	0	2	
Decatur Library event	17	36.2	13	4	2	0	4	9	2	1	13	1	0	2	
Kennesaw State University Library event	7	14.9	3	4	2	3	0	2	0	2	5	0	0	0	
SAMLA	14	29.8	9	5	1	6	3	2	2	3	8	1	1	1	
Total	47	100	32	15	9	11	8	14	5	8	30	3	1	5	
% of Total			68.1	31.9	19.1	23.4	17	29.8	10.6	17	63.8	6.4	2.1	10.6	

Total participants			Registered voter				Politics (open-ended response)				
	Freq	%	Yes	No	No response	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Other	No response	
Brookhaven Library event	9	19.1	8	1	0	3	4	1	0	1	
Decatur Library event	17	36.2	11	4	2	1	7	2	5	3	
Kennesaw State University Library event	7	14.9	7	0	0	0	5	2	2	0	
SAMLA	14	29.8	10	3	1	0	11	1	1	0	
Total	47	100	36	8	3	4	27	6	6	4	
% of total			76.6	17	6.4	8.5	57.4	12.8	12.8	8.5	

marginalized communities themselves. Even with the takeaways, a significant difference due to political affiliation or race was not detected. However, the data and our analysis (attendees completed paper surveys at each event, $n = 49$, and subsequently we compiled and analyzed the data in Excel) provide insights as to how immigrant stories can shape public perception of the topic of immigration. Furthermore, this project serves as a starting point to identify future research to be conducted with larger sample sizes in other places and regions.

Results I: In Their Own Words—Mapping the Model of Cultural Identity Negotiation

The core category of Cohen and Kassan's (2018) model of cultural identity negotiation, One's Motivation and Sense of Agency to Negotiate Cultural Identity, comprises six factors that determine how immigrants negotiate their existing and emergent identities. Below we report findings associated with each of these six categories.

Family and Cultural Rigidity

This was the most challenging category to measure in our analysis. Since we analyzed written essays, we could not ask the student authors to elaborate on specific themes or topics, and very few student authors describe incidents or practices that are indicative of their family's cultural rigidity. Some student authors describe their parents as enforcing the same or even stricter rules than before they came to the United States. May Da describes this in part, when she writes, "My Uncle told me, Don't go outside. There are a lot of strangers" (Da, 2018, p. 90).

Most of the comments on this topic indicate an atmosphere of low cultural rigidity in which parents encourage their children to explore parts of the host country's culture, particularly in terms of expanding their English skills. In another essay, America explains how her mother placed great emphasis on her daughter's ability to speak English: "My teachers knew Spanish and would speak to me in Spanish. My mom would get really mad because I wasn't learning any English. So, she had to try harder to teach me English" (America, 2018, p. 90). Parents encouraging and requiring their children to acquire skills in the host country's dominant language is a common theme in immigration literature. A differentiation needs to be made in this context between language skills that serve the sole purpose of being a tool

for everyday life and those that are used to build or increase cultural ties and a sense of belonging in the host country.

Connections Specific to the United States

Connections specific to the United States were mentioned in all essays, with 21 authors explicitly pointing out either important connections to individuals they met during their educational path in the United States or a general appreciation for the education they received in the United States, as is evident in this statement from Eliyas's essay: "Now my passion is learning. There are so many great resources here" (Sala, 2018, p. 86). During high school, club memberships and other extracurricular activities helped student authors develop meaningful connections. Further, desire to receive a college education in the United States was a common theme. Some student authors, like HM, express specific goals: "Once I graduate high school, I'll try to get accepted into Stanford. I love Stanford. This is one of my goals to go to Stanford and take classes" (Sakib, 2018, p. 36).

Twenty student authors mentioned either that their current jobs give them purpose or contributed to a positive evaluation of their current situation or that they envision a future career in the United States. For example, Dania writes, "I've thought about being a teacher. I'm not sure of the career I want. I feel like that's not going to be an issue because America is a place with many better opportunities" (Karim, 2018, p. 54). Yehimi's experience is evidence of one of those opportunities, whereby after completing her undergraduate studies she enrolled in Teach for America. Teach for America actively recruits "diverse leaders to teach for two years in a low-income community, whereby they are employed by local schools and confront both the challenges and joys of expanding opportunities for kids" (Teach for America, n.d.).

Educational experiences also play a crucial part in the lives of the young immigrants in our research in terms of the creation of new social networks. In high school, many student authors found friends, often from different cultural backgrounds. For example, Luis shares, "I had classmates from Pakistan, Algeria, Venezuela. I didn't feel like very isolated because my school was diverse and accepting. I enjoy meeting new people and learning about their cultures" (Luis, 2018, p. 58). Through their education, some student authors were introduced to other activities that

they enjoy and were able to find friends that way. Faysal writes, “I played soccer in Ethiopia, and I still play soccer here. That has helped me make friends and adapt to the new environment ... helps you assimilate with new people and adjust to a new life” (Ando, 2018, p. 101).

Overall, friendships and plans for education and career goals positively influenced the sense of belonging, as Sean explains:

[I was in] eighth grade when I came out of my shell, joined activities, and made friends. I found a group that made me feel like I belonged, and I found friends I could relate to and that I still talk to in high school. Those people helped shape me into the person I am today. (Cordovez, 2018, p. 50)

Having meaningful interactions with members of the host community shapes the immigrant experience significantly, and high school seems to provide a fruitful environment for young immigrants to engage with the host community and build their own social networks.

Connection to a Same-Cultured Community

Several student authors mentioned that they perceived it as beneficial to have connections to individuals who speak the language of their country of origin, particularly in the beginning when the student authors had limited English skills or were too shy to communicate in English. Marie describes her experience the following way:

I was very scared because I did not know anyone there [at school] that was from my country that could speak my language. That made me sad because I couldn't speak with everyone because I didn't know enough English. But the next week, I got a friend who spoke my language. (Nikuze, 2018, pp. 2-3)

Not having same-cultured friends seems to be difficult, especially in the beginning, as Nu Nu recalls: “The house was good, but there were no Burmese people, no friends, and that was so difficult for me” (Nu Nu, 2018, p. 20).

Some students seem very comfortable having a group of friends who come from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Faysal, for example, describes his group of friends the following way: “There's a few Muslims here and we are friends, but most of my friends are Christians” (Ando, 2018,

p. 101). A heightened focus on making similar-cultured friends is evident, especially shortly after arrival in the United States. Difficulties with speaking and understanding English, whether because of a lack of linguistic skills or due to shyness, shape the initial desire to establish friendships with same-language speakers. The focus on finding same-cultured friends seems to decrease, however, as English skills improve, and the youth immigrants gain confidence in navigating their new environment.

Sense of Permanency

A sense of permanency, or a reasonable expectation and ability to stay in the United States and take specific steps toward remaining permanently, is a crucial component of the emergence of a host-country identity. Making specific plans about higher education or a career in the host country is an indication that a sense of permanency is present. Sanjith, for example, expresses his plans: “If I learn, and if I do more and more, I will get a better future here in Atlanta. I will get a better job, I hope. After five years, we will be citizens of the U.S” (Yadav, 2018, p. 77). Becoming a citizen of the host country is the ultimate sign of a desired formalized permanent relationship with the host country.

Intending to visit the country of origin was a common theme, but student authors differ significantly in their intention to stay in the United States. While some hope to stay permanently, others consider moving back to their country of origin. Farhat, for example, plans on staying in the United States: “In Afghanistan, I knew I wanted to be an accountant, and I want to be an accountant here in America too. ... I want to be an accountant to help all the people in my American community” (Sadat, 2018, p. 71). A difference could be observed for DACA recipients, who place emphasis on the positive change that receiving legal status in the United States made for them. Yehimi, for example, described the impact of DACA on her life: “It was like a window of time my life could feel normal for that two-year period” (Cambrón, 2018, p. 109).

A sense of permanency affects how young immigrants engage with the host community and the steps they take toward finding a successful future in the host country. The sense of permanency can be influenced by different factors, including immigration status, steps toward receiving higher education, and close family residing in the host country.

Desire to Preserve Culture of Origin

The desire to retain the culture of origin was expressed through attempts to learn about the country of origin's history and culture, to maintain language skills, and to make plans, vague or concrete, of visiting. Faysal explained:

Someday I want to go back there to visit my family and discover more about my country. I would like to make money to help my family out because I feel like I got very lucky by coming here. It's a lot of pressure to help them cause I'm the only one that got this chance to get this far. ... We still have to help them. When you move, you still have past connections, and you still have to help them out. (Ando, 2018, p. 102)

Eight student authors even intend to move back to their country of origin at some point, with all of them stating they would do so to help their family, community, or country in general. Nu Nu states:

When I finish high school and college, I will go back in my country to help my people and my village in Myanmar. If I cannot be a lawyer, I want to be a teacher and teach people in Myanmar how to speak English. (Nu Nu, 2018, p. 21)

Three student authors express a desire to learn or retain knowledge about the culture of origin explicitly. Karelin explains this in her essay:

In coming to the U.S., I had to give up my family. The person who I cared for the most was my grandfather. He played the role of a paternal figure in my life because I did not grow up with my father, and many of the good memories I have in Guatemala involve him. ... He would read me amazing legends of the Maya and our culture and heritage. (Karelin, 2018, p. 94)

Maintaining the connection to the culture of origin is a crucial theme in immigrant identity negotiation. The culture of origin represents relational ties, customs, and traditions that one is familiar with and is the baseline of cultural understanding that new experiences are measured against. Being fluent in the language of the country of origin is often the only way to communicate with family members in the country of origin and helps with blending in when visiting the country

of origin and reestablishing a sense of belonging within the culture of origin.

Desire to Fit into U.S. Culture

To fit into U.S. culture, student authors employed different strategies. A common theme we detected was altering behavior, sometimes as simple as putting on a seatbelt, like Sean remembers:

My dad and my grandfather picked me up from the airport. They told me to put my seatbelt on, which I was not used to because in the Philippines seatbelts were not regulated as often, so we did not wear them as much as people do here in the U.S. (Cordovez, 2018, p. 48)

Learning how to navigate life in the United States was challenging for some students. Kumba, for example, felt a need to adapt, but remembers the difficulties: "I felt like I had to adapt and it took me a long time. Luckily, I was able to catch up fast, but it was difficult when I first got here. It's still difficult sometimes" (Nije, 2018, p. 12).

For most of the student authors, acquiring or improving English skills was the focus of their adjustment. Although this process was challenging, many student authors studied hard and understood very well that speaking the language was key to establishing new friendships and a potential college education. As Edanur explains, "To help adjust to America, I started to learn English. Making friends and being able to communicate with people helped me a lot" (Isik, 2018, p. 71). Farhat describes the internal drive and pressure to learn English:

When I'm not in school, I study English all the time. I study so many words. I'm scared because I cannot speak English very well, so I study it at home. I get so tired, but I watch videos in English to learn more. ... I want to speak very well (Sadat, 2018, p. 71).

For some, like Hau Phuong, his lack of English skills resulted in ridicule:

I spoke English to other people, and they laughed at me. They laughed at my accent. I was confused and thought, 'Why do they have to laugh at me?' Just because we came from another country did not mean that they had to laugh at me (Phuong, 2018, p. 6).

The desire to fit into U.S. culture was a prominent theme throughout the essays. While this desire was often accompanied by excitement and plans for the future, it also came with internal tension as to how both cultural identities can coexist.

Results II: Assessing Public Impact—Qualitative Survey Results about the Stories of Immigrant Youth

In this section, we describe the results of the qualitative surveys administered to a sample of attendees of public events related to *Green Card Youth Voices: Immigration Stories From an Atlanta High School*, at which a selection of the student authors shared their stories. Table 3 provides an overview of survey participant ($n = 49$) responses to the Likert-scale survey items. We discuss these below along with the themes that emerged from survey participants' open-ended responses.

As seen in Table 3, most survey participants across all events indicated a *moderate* (47%) to *significant* (34%) level of prior personal knowledge of or interaction with immigrants, refugees, and/or immigrant communities. Many participants (64%) also indicated no prior involvement in community or advocacy work with immigrant communities. Following the surveyed events, nearly half of all survey participants indicated that the event readings and discussions had a *significant* impact (49%), while 45% indicated a *moderate* impact.

Regarding how the event increased their understanding of the immigrant experience, many survey participants (68%) indicated a *moderate* increase in understanding, while 26% indicated a *significant* increase in understanding. For instance, one participant observed, "It cannot be understated how much of an impact that something I initially viewed as a school project can have on the communities that are so close to us. Immigrant stories are not monolithic." Another participant stated, "The stories are as diverse as the individuals themselves. Hearing the stories and how much the students work toward success and furthering their education." Furthermore, another participant responded, "That every person has a story that goes beyond the generalities & statistics, and that their story deserves to be told." Such qualitative responses, along with participants' Likert-scale responses, indicate that the public dissemination of the immigrant youth-authored stories about their own immigration experiences had a positive impact on public perception about immigrant experiences.

Over half of survey participants (51%) indicated a *significant* increase in acceptance of migrant communities, while 32% indicated a *moderate* increase. No participants stated that the event decreased their acceptance of migrant communities. Regarding whether or not and to what extent the event sparked a further interest to engage with or participate in initiatives that cultivate more welcoming and inclusive communities, 28% of survey participants indicated they were interested in exploring more options, 34% indicated that they would like to engage more in a *significant* amount, 13% indicated they were already engaged and would continue in this capacity, and 17% indicated that they were already engaged and interested in increasing their involvement.

In general, the three survey questions that gauged program impact (Q4), shift in understanding (Q6), and acceptance (Q7) were usually answered similarly. Usually, Q4, the question about a shift in understanding of the immigrant experience was only *moderate*; compared to Q6 and Q7 whose responses were noted as *significant*. Some participants mentioned *significant* for the other two questions and rated the increase of understanding of the immigrant experience as *moderate*. This trend may be influenced by several factors, including a participant's prior knowledge, whether they had advocacy experience, and the fact that the stories provided only gave a small dimension of the immigrant experience on purpose. Some participants spoke directly to the impact of hearing the personal stories/testimonies of the students, and several specifically mentioned the words "stories" or "testimonies." While some participants were educators, several mentioned being motivated to come to the event due to personal experiences and interactions with students or their advocacy work including teaching some form of migrant or multicultural studies.

Discussion

The student authors' strong focus on learning or improving their English was the most salient theme in our analysis. Student authors identified English as a tool to help them navigate their new environment; this heavy emphasis on learning the host country's dominant language is consistent with previous research (Fillmore, 1991; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Proficiency in the dominant language is tied to academic and professional success and to establishing diverse social networks. Thus, language serves as a key tool to navigate

Table 3. Survey Results About Program Event Impact

Total participants		Q3 Prior to this event, how would you describe the level of your personal knowledge about or interaction with immigrants, refugees, and/or immigrant communities?						Q4 Now, at the completion of this event, how would you describe the impact of the readings and discussion?					
	Freq	%	None	Limited	Moderate	Significant	No response	None	Limited	Moderate	Significant	No response	
Brookhaven Library event	9	19.1	0	3	2	4		0	0	1	2	6	0
Decatur Library event	17	36.2	0	4	9	4		0	0	0	11	5	1
Kennesaw State University Library event	7	14.9	0	1	4	2		0	0	0	3	4	0
SAMLA	14	29.8	0	1	7	6		0	0	1	5	8	0
Total	47	100	0	9	22	16		0	0	2	21	23	1
% of total			0	19.1	46.8	34		0	0	4.3	44.7	48.9	2.1

Total participants		Q5 Before this event, were you involved in community or advocacy work with immigrant communities?					Q6 Considering this event, rate how it increased your understanding of the immigrant experience?				
		Freq	%	Yes	No	No response	None	Limited	Moderate	Significant	No response
Brookhaven Library event	9	19.1	3	6		0	0	1	6	2	0
Decatur Library event	17	36.2	3	14		0	0	2	12	3	0
Kennesaw State University Library event	7	14.9	4	3		0	0	0	4	3	0
SAMLA	14	29.8	7	7		0	0	0	10	4	0
Total	47	100	17	30		0	0	3	32	12	0
% of total			36.2	63.8		0	0	6.4	68.1	25.5	0

Table 3 (continued). Survey Results About Program Event Impact

Total participants		Q7 To what extent did this event increase your acceptance of migrant communities?							
		Freq	%	None	Limited	Moderate	Significant	Actually decreased	No response
Brookhaven Library event		9	19.1	1	1	1	6	0	0
Decatur Library event		17	36.2	3	1	6	7	0	0
Kennesaw State University Library event		7	14.9	0	0	2	5	0	0
SAMLA		14	29.8	1	0	6	6	0	1
Total		47	100	5	2	15	24	0	1
% of total				10.6	4.3	31.9	51.1	0	2.1

Total participants		Q8 As a result of this event, how likely are you to engage with or participate in initiatives that cultivate more welcoming and inclusive communities?								
	Freq	%	Not likely	Interested in exploring options	Would like to engage more in a limited capacity	Would like to engage more in a significant amount	Already engaged and will continue in this capacity	Already engaged and interested in increasing involvement	No response	
Brookhaven Library event	9	19.1	0	4	0	4	0	1	0	
Decatur Library event	17	36.2	0	7	3	4	2	1	0	
Kennesaw State University Library event	7	14.9	0	1	0	3	1	2	0	
SAMLA	14	29.8	1	1	0	5	3	4	0	
Total	47	100	1	13	3	16	6	8	0	
% of total			2.1	27.7	6.4	34	12.8	17	0	

everyday life in the host country as well as a critical component of social mobility. But language is more than just a tool for navigating the new environment; language also offers a path to identity development. For most immigrants, as Olsen (2000) points out, “becoming English speaking is the same as becoming American” (p. 197). Thus, acquiring or improving English skills can be an indication of identity development, particularly in conjunction with other indicators, such as meaningful contact with the host community and a sense of permanency.

Meaningful contact with members of the host community or meaningful connections to institutions in the host country are key components of the immigration experience as well. Martiny et al. (2017) and Berry et al. (2006) have suggested that forming ties with the host community, including, for example, meaningful contact with members of the host community, aids in developing or strengthening an identity that is related to the host country. We see this confirmed in our study to some extent; meaningful contact in the form of friendships played a crucial role for many student authors and helped them feel comfortable in their new environments. Interestingly though, whether the new friend was a native-born American or an immigrant from another country did not seem to affect the sense of belonging. Merely the fact that new social contacts in the host country were established aided in the creation of a sense of belonging.

The desire to preserve one’s culture of origin was widespread; visiting one’s country of origin was a recurring theme, and previous research confirms that visits aid significantly in preserving social ties (Duval, 2004; Marschall, 2017) and retaining language skills (J. S. Lee, 2002). Homeland memory and the notion of visiting or even moving back, regardless of whether those plans are feasible and realistic or not, are crucial components of preserving one’s homeland cultural identity (Long & Oxfeld, 2004). The student authors’ sense of permanency seems to be affected by meaningful relations and their educational and professional plans.

Interestingly, all student authors who stated an intention of moving back to their country of origin expressed the desire to do so to help their extended family or improve the situation in their country of origin in general. Although no one mentioned the term specifically, there are links here with the concept of *transnationalism* (Schiller

et al., 1992; Vertovec, 2009). We also noticed a heightened sense of responsibility among student authors to fulfill their families’ expectations to complete their education in the United States and often to have a successful professional career. Both findings confirm previous studies on this topic (Allat, 1993; Lauglo, 2000; Lee et al., 2016; Obsiye & Cook, 2016).

Immigrant parents see their children’s academic or professional endeavors as increasing the upward social mobility of the whole family and future generations. Immigrant children are aware of this responsibility and generally aim to fulfill family expectations, sometimes causing an increased amount of pressure (Fuligni, 2006). Student authors described this phenomenon as well, with a greater emphasis on their own sense of responsibility and desire to assist their family in the United States and in their country of origin. Our sample size was relatively small, and we recommend increasing the sample size in a future research project to enhance understanding of nuances in identity transition and creation among youth immigrants.

The stories shared by the student authors also had an impact on participants at public events. Survey participants indicated an overall moderate to significant impact on their perception and understanding of immigrant experiences, highlighting the need for exposure to and visibility of immigrant voices in the public sphere.

Conclusion

This research project examined youth immigrant experiences from two angles: First, we analyzed the experiences student authors shared about themselves and their immigration and resettlement experience. In a second step, we surveyed participants at public community events where the young immigrants shared their stories.

For young immigrants, developing language skills (in this case English) is a key concern and focus. This is not surprising, since skills in the dominant language are tied to academic and professional success and thus social mobility. Language is also a core building block in the development of host-country identity and aids in the creation of a sense of belonging. Importantly, unlike many other processes and skills that immigrants must acquire upon arrival, language is a unique tool, because immigrants can begin learning the language prior to arrival and have a significant advantage on arrival.

Identity tensions among immigrants are a natural part of any immigrant experience. The desire to fit into the new culture and to preserve the culture of the country of origin can compete with each other but often lead to dual identities. Transition processes can be difficult, and transitional identities result in a heightened level of identity tension that is internally resolved. Our findings indicate the positive effect of English skills and friendships in developing a sense of belonging for immigrant youth. Integration into the educational system and extracurricular activities aid significantly in achieving language skills and creating and deepening social ties to the host community.

Making individual immigration experiences visible and exposing community members to individual immigrant youth-authored stories yielded significant results. Participants at public events indicated that the events had a moderate to significant impact in shaping their perception and understanding of the immigrant experience. This emphasizes the need to focus on community events that bring together both new immigrants and members of the host community. Events that build bridges for community members to learn about the individual stories of newly arrived members build empathy and understanding. Making immigrants and their individual struggles and success stories visible in the communities where they live has the potential to alter public perception. This study should be replicated, as our findings indicate the potential for improving the resettlement experience and immigrant–host country community relations alike by exposing host communities to immigrant stories and experiences.

In summary, our study is an example of how university–community partnerships can have a significant impact on topics of global awareness, immigration, civic engagement, and the future needs of a particular place. As such, this paper encourages further work in which community-based service-learning initiatives can create new visions for civic engagement and research methodologies that can help ascertain community impact and opinion. We assert that inclusive storytelling from both positions—storyteller and story-hearer—is vital for improved immigrant integration, specifically and more broadly, in envisioning and designing an innovative and inclusive future.

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