Facilitating belonging for newcomer migrant students at MHS

How do newcomer migrant students experience a new school environment?

Newcomer students at MHS describe their first days as filled with confusion, fear, and often isolation. While some approach their new school environment with optimism, many struggle to understand routines and expectations, making peer support and empathetic teachers crucial for easing this transition.

What are their opportunities for support and connection?

We identified three dimensions of school experiences that facilitate newcomer students' sense of belonging:

- Linguistic: Students thrive when their home languages and cultures are celebrated and leveraged for learning (e.g., translanguaging, language clubs, ELD/Bridge Programs).
- Relational: Trusted adult and peer relationships are critical. Formal and informal mentoring, staff who speak students' home languages, and peer support all foster a sense of connection and support.
- Organizational: Understanding school routines, rules, and norms helps newcomers navigate and participate in school life with more confidence.

What challenges do they face?

Many newcomers are unfamiliar with the "hidden curriculum" of school life in the US, e.g., bell schedules, disciplinary rules, classroom technology. While MHS has supportive systems in place, gaps remain in students' understanding of rules, routines, and available supports from the start. These findings point to the need for a more standardized and proactive approach to onboarding, so newcomers can navigate school life confidently and make the most of existing resources. Additionally, a clearer onboarding system would benefit teachers, allowing them to focus more on instruction and relationship-building without procedural explanations about how school works, postsecondary opportunities, etc. Strengthening these processes could significantly improve newcomer students' early experiences. Newcomer students also feel the stress of external issues like family upheaval, concerns about immigration enforcement, and global conflicts.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ensure a robust orientation and onboarding process.
Develop a comprehensive, multilingual onboarding process for students and families. This should include school norms, resources, key contacts, and academic pathways to graduation. Ensure that teachers have relevant background information about newcomer students (home language, educational history, etc.) before they arrive in class.

2. Accelerate peer mentoring and peer-to-peer connections
Expand and front-load peer mentoring, ensuring newcomers are matched with student guides before they begin school. The peer mentorship program can give tours, explain norms, and foster early relationships, reducing isolation and anxiety.

3. Increase Linguistic Supports and ELL staffing
Offer more ELL courses to reduce class size and increase student attention and support. Develop shared practices, such as a check-in following announcements to ensure that students understand important information.

4. Communicate clear expectations, consistently.
Standardize the distribution of procedural information to all newcomers, with clear explanations of rules, resources, and extracurricular opportunities. Translate materials like the PBIS matrix into the major languages spoken in the school. Make it easy for students to ask questions and get help.

Some potential steps to enact the above:
- Co-create and pilot onboarding materials with input from newcomers and peer mentors, so the process remains relevant, supportive, and iterative.
- Develop a multilingual resource guide and/or videos with concise instructions for navigating school expectations, resources, and opportunities.
- Create a devoted staff or volunteer position for a Newcomer Coordinator, or develop a Newcomer Coordinating Team.

Key takeaway: By strengthening orientation, connection, and communication, MHS can better support newcomers' transitions, from anxiety and isolation toward confidence and a sense of belonging.

Potential future research directions for the MHS- UM collaboration:

- Older newcomer students have unique experiences and challenges, including added familial and societal pressures to transition into adulthood. Though MHS has a small population of "overage" students, it could be useful to design a study that explores their particular assets, concerns, and challenges in navigating high school.

- Gender dynamics play a key role in shaping peer relationships and classroom interactions. In recent years, more female students have opted for online courses. A study examining newcomer girls' experiences might help us better understand the opportunities and challenges they experience, both in and out of school.

- Technology stood out this year as a point of tension for a number of teachers, particularly cell phones and AI. There is an opportunity to attend to the role of technology in supporting and potentially impeding students' learning.

- Once multilingual students transition into General Education classes, they likely encounter a new set of academic and social expectations. A study could highlight ways that teachers and students navigate this transition, potentially extending to students who are not multilingual and how they learn about and work together with classmates with migratory backgrounds.

- The peer mentorship program is in its pilot year. As it grows and gains stability, it might be useful to design a study that centers on this support intervention, exploring the extent to which it closes the gaps it intends to, and how peer mentor-mentee dynamics are facilitated through the program.

- If there are substantial shifts to the onboarding process, this too could create an opportunity for a more in-depth examination of how shifts in practice are being taken up by educators and experienced by students.

- It might also be a rich time to reflect on the MHS-UM collaboration and ask about what has been helpful, what has supported shifts in thinking and/or practice, how the UM team could better communicate and collaborate with the MHS community.

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