

**FACTORS AFFECTING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**  
**AS PERCEIVED BY SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS**  
**WITH IRANIAN BACKGROUND IN CANADA**

Thesis submitted for the degree of

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At the University of Leicester

by

Carol Lee Langley

Lions Bay, British Columbia

Canada

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## ABSTRACT

Despite continuing interest in **academic achievement** theory and approaches on **culturally diverse students**, explanations remain inadequate and incomplete. In Canada much of the focus has been on particular groups, particularly those of First Nations ancestry. Much of the research and theory also fails to address successful students and students other than those from a low socioeconomic status. In addition it lacks the perceptions and interpretations of those who may have the most valuable contributions to make – those being the students themselves.

This study combines elements of both micro- and macro-ethnography, as well as other types of qualitative research, in the examination of the **perceptions of students** with **Iranian** backgrounds attending a secondary school in one of the wealthiest areas in Canada. The student participants identified five primary factors as most important to their academic successes and difficulties: (1) **language**, (2) **family**, (3) **peers**, (4) **school**, and (5) **racism**. Findings are presented primarily in the words of the students. They are analyzed contextually and in conjunction with data gathered from the students' parents and educators at their school. Findings confirm the incompleteness and inadequacies of theories on and/or approaches to the academic achievement of culturally diverse students when applied to Canadian students with Iranian background and suggest directions for further attention. Results may be useful in the fight against stereotypical thinking and racism. They may also aid in a better understanding of the complex connection between **ethnicity and school achievement**. This understanding is necessary for educators to be able to help guide their culturally diverse students to academic success. Recommendations for doing so are included in the last chapter.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### A. Background to the Study

Love for children and learning about people from different cultures, experience teaching in an International school in the Middle East, and experiences as a parent of children attending an International School with a culturally diverse population have all contributed to the researcher's interest in students with culturally diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, as a school psychologist she has found that many students with learning difficulties who are referred for special education services are from culturally diverse backgrounds. This is consistent with research indicating that culturally and linguistically diverse students are over-referred to and over-represented in special education (Cummins, 1991a; Rice & Ortiz, 1994).

In addition, the researcher has felt overwhelmed and discouraged and at times inadequate in her attempts to understand the cognitive and academic functioning of culturally diverse students. While literature reviews undertaken on culturally responsive pedagogy (Trembley, 2002c) and on culturally sensitive psycho-educational assessment (Trembley, 2002a) were helpful, they also pointed out the limitations of the research and literature in this area.

These reviews also made the researcher question the accuracy and relevance of some of the available theory and research on the academic achievement of culturally diverse students for specific ethnic groups of students she works closely with. Many of the students who are referred to her in a particular high school within British Columbia, Canada, are of Iranian background. Having lived in the Middle East for eight years and traveled throughout Iran, as well as having many friends with an Iranian background, the researcher also feels an affinity with the students with Iranian backgrounds whom she works with. Research involving this group of students is scant, and would be extremely interesting and useful for her and other educators in her district to gain a better understanding of some of the many students with Iranian backgrounds within their schools. This understanding is essential to helping them overcome academic difficulties and to gain more academic success.

In her attempts to better understand the students she works with, the researcher has always tried to begin by examining their beliefs, experiences, and feelings. It was strongly

felt that this general approach to her daily work could help provide a framework for the research design of a study on the academic achievement of students with Iranian background.

## **B. Need for the Study**

The seeds for this study thus began with the researcher's personal desire to better understand the high school students with Iranian background in the school district where she works and a general sense of how she would prefer to design a study to help in this endeavour. As she began to examine the relevant research and literature, it became evident that there was a definite need for the type of study she was interested in undertaking.

From the initial literature review it was clear that there is no simple explanation which accounts for student achievement. According to Nieto (2000), most theories or explanations have been inadequate or incomplete. She states:

Some have failed to consider the significance of culture in learning; others have not taken into account the social, cultural, and political context of schooling; and still others have placed all the responsibility for academic failure or success on students and their families. Even the persistence of racism and discrimination, or the presence of unjust policies and practices in schools, or the role that schools play in reproducing existing societal inequities do not by themselves explain school failure (Nieto, 2000, p.244).

The relationship between ethnicity and school achievement is in particular need of further study (Portes, 1999). Studies which focus on this relationship, however, need to consider the multitude of other variables which have also been linked to academic achievement, including personal, familial, interactive, political, and societal ones, and their interconnecting relationships. Qualitative studies which present students contextually and which provide rich, in-depth data are thus needed. Ethnography has been deemed particularly appropriate for providing such data, and many researchers have stated the need for this type of study. According to Ford (1992), for example, ethnographic studies "can mark the beginning of understanding more fully the dynamics of achievement among racially and culturally different groups" (p.135).

Because research indicates that culturally diverse students are more likely to experience academic failure (Banks & Banks, 2001; Nieto, 2000), the focus of much of the research and theory has been on groups of students having difficulties in school. Smith, Gilmore, Goodman, and McDermott (1993) suggest that this focus on failure has done little to help

schools organize for more learning to take place. They speak of the “failure of failure”, and stress the need for studies examining the experiences of successful students. Many other researchers, including Nieto (1999; 2000), Gandara (1995), and Padilla and Gonzalez (2001) have also argued for the need to extend the focus beyond school failure in order to better understand the dynamics of educational achievement amongst culturally diverse students. Hrabowski (2003) states, “We should listen carefully to the voices of successful students to learn what factors made a positive difference in their lives” (p.45).

The focus on failure has also meant that few studies have been conducted which include culturally diverse students from other than low socioeconomic backgrounds. Indeed, Barrera (1995) suggests that until recently there has been no distinction made between cultural diversity and poverty. Studies which include culturally diverse students from a mid to high socioeconomic background may help dispel some of the stereotypes permeating the literature on the academic achievement of culturally diverse students.

Also missing from many explanations of academic achievement are students’ perspectives (Artiles, Aguirre-Munoz, & Abedi, 1998). Phelan, Davidson and Yu (1998) state that “there has been little written that details the perspectives of students or their interpretation of circumstances and events that impinge on their lives and their ability to connect with educational settings” (p.19). It is important that we understand how students experience and perceive schooling because these perceptions are linked to their behaviours and academic performance (Artiles et al., 1998; Eccles, Adler & Meece, 1984; Ford, 1993). Students’ perspectives are vital to school achievement, yet few investigators have examined culturally diverse students’ schooling experiences (Artiles et al., 1998). Ford (1992) suggests that new research needs to focus on the perceptions that culturally diverse students hold regarding their achievement.

There is a further need for research involving particular ethnic groups. Recent attention has been paid to the educational experiences of First Nations students in Canada (Alladin, 1996). Attention has also been given to Asian Canadian students because of their increasing numbers in Canadian schools, and because of the perceived notion of their superiority in academic achievement (Le, 2002). There has, however, been little attention given to less visible ethnic groups, including those with Iranian backgrounds (Ansari, 1974). Hoffman (1988) concedes that those with Iranian backgrounds in the United States “remain a hidden, unrecognized, and poorly researched group” (p. 164), and there is no reason to believe that they have been given any more attention in Canada. After an extensive search of the

literature only two studies involving students with Iranian backgrounds in North America were found (Hoffman, 1988; Zadeh, 2001).

Until more research involving Iranian students is undertaken, Canadian educators cannot begin to address their needs in this nation's schools. There is an additional benefit to studies involving this group of students. As previously stated, studies which may help dispel some of the stereotypes permeating academic achievement literature are desperately required. As Hoffman (1988) points out, the Iranian group does not fit the typical ethnic minority image. She argues that, in general, Iranians in North America are highly educated, economically successful professionals of relatively privileged social class. This cultural group does not therefore evoke general concepts of inequality or disadvantage, and thus studies including its members would be most valuable in the fight against stereotypical notions in research and theory on the academic achievement of culturally diverse students.

Dispelling stereotypes of Iranian students may also be particularly critical given recent world events. Ahmad (2001) notes the presence of "Islamophobia", which has grown in western nations since the late 1980s. The events of September 11, 2001 have escalated this phenomenon (Michie, 2002). In a recent ethnographic study low-achieving urban high school students identified racism and discrimination as a primary contributor to their underachievement (Lee, 1999). Whether racism and discrimination emerge as a central theme in the perceptions of Iranian Canadian students towards their school achievement will be a timely piece of information which may help educators to lessen its impact in Canadian schools.

### **C. The Research Problem**

The need for a particular type of research in the study of the academic achievement of culturally diverse students, combined with the researcher's interests helped define clearly the research problem addressed in the current study. The primary problem of the study was to examine the perceptions of a number of students with Iranian backgrounds attending a secondary school in one of the wealthiest areas in Canada regarding academic achievement.

A key objective of the study was to determine how the students' perceptions relate to the theory and research on the academic achievement of culturally diverse students. What these students identified as most important to their academic successes and failures serves to confirm or to question some of this theory and research. Findings suggest areas requiring further attention.

The findings help demonstrate the complex connection between ethnicity and school achievement. While attention is primarily given to emergent common themes, negative instances and within group variance are also be discussed. This adds trustworthiness to the study and helped dispel stereotypes from emerging on students with Iranian backgrounds.

How the students' perceptions match those of their parents and teachers was addressed secondarily. Common views indicate that the perceptions are shared by a wider group and thus may be closer to the reality than those over which there is lack of agreement.

It is helpful to discuss the key terminology chosen in the research problem presented above. Language is always changing, and it mirrors social, political, and economic events (Nieto, 2000). Some terms evolve as an attempt to be more precise and correct. It is for this reason that the researcher chose to use "culturally diverse" students rather than "minority" students. The latter term most often evokes a low status group, and one whose members are missing something. It could be argued that this terminology is offensive to all to whom it is applied. It seems especially inaccurate in reference to a group in which the study participants would be included, as will be seen when they are described in following chapters. Using the term "culturally diverse" suggests a distinction between this group and the way those in the majority group are most often envisioned, and it is also hoped by the researcher that it may provoke a more positive image in the reader. It is acknowledged, however, that there is no completely suitable term for the group to which the researcher is referring, and that others may prefer to use different language for this group.

Study participants are most often described as "students with Iranian background". This terminology includes students who have, and those who do not have, Canadian citizenship. Other terms used to refer to this group are those preferred by the students themselves, which are included in the **Findings** chapter.

The other key terminology used in the research problem is "academic achievement". The researcher acknowledges that this construct may mean different things to different people, and presents evidence of this in her literature review. She purposefully tried to avoid defining this term to the research participants in order that they may use their own meaning assigned to this term. The commonalities which emerged in their use of the term was that it existed on a continuum, with successful and non-successful at the ends, and that it was associated with class marks and behaviour.

A brief overview of how the remainder of this thesis is presented will highlight more specific objectives of each chapter, as well as serve as a map of its contents.

#### **D. Organization of the Thesis**

**Chapter II, “Literature Review”** begins with an overview and critique of theories on the academic achievement of culturally diverse students. These theories are identified as being erroneous, inadequate, or incomplete. Variables which have been linked to the academic achievement of culturally diverse students and which are not addressed adequately in any of the presented theories are then examined. The small amount of research and literature on students with Iranian backgrounds is discussed, suggesting which particular issues, challenges and ideas may be most pertinent to the participants in the current study.

**Chapter III, “Research Design/Methodology”** clarifies the research problem and explains the primarily ethnographic research design which was chosen as the most appropriate framework in which to address this problem. Validity and ethical issues of the research are addressed. The methods of investigation, including interviews, observation, focus groups, and document analysis are described and their use justified according to research literature. Note of what data each method would produce is made. The data analysis procedures followed are then clearly explained.

**Chapter IV, “Findings”** begins with a description of the student participants and how they see themselves. The findings are then organized according to the themes which emerged as most important to their academic successes and difficulties, including language, family, peers, school, and racism. As much as possible the findings are presented in the words of the student participants. It is hoped that this chapter may inspire some educators to listen to and honour culturally diverse students in their classrooms. The perspectives of the student participants are presented contextually where appropriate to allow for the inclusion of factors which may shape wider patterns of success and failure in their analysis. Observations and findings from the student participants’ parents and teachers are presented when they may help confirm or call into question the reality of the students’ perceptions.

**Chapter V, “Analysis, Synthesis and Discussion”** relates the findings with the theory, research and literature on academic achievement of culturally diverse students.

**Chapter VI, “Conclusions and Recommendations”** summarizes how the research problem was answered, and original knowledge which emerged is presented. An evaluation of the research and its limitations is provided. New directions for further research and recommendations for guiding culturally diverse students to success are provided.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This review begins with an examination and critique of the theoretical approaches to the academic achievement of culturally diverse students. It then focuses on the research and literature on each of the variables which were found most relevant to the participants in the current study.

#### **A. Theoretical Approaches to the Academic Achievement of Culturally Diverse Students**

##### **1. Genetic Inferiority and Cultural Deprivation Theory**

Theories of genetic inferiority and cultural deprivation have been one of the recurrent themes in North American educational history. These theories gained popularity during the 1960s and 70s. These theories have been identified as classist and racist and inadequate in explaining the academic failure of many students (Alladin, 1996). Despite their lack of credibility, Neito (2000) cautions that genetic and cultural inferiority theories are not a thing of the past. As recently as 1994, Hernstein and Murray (1994) argued that genetic inferiority was the root cause of the academic failure among African American students. Serious scholars have, however, discredited genetic and cultural inferiority theories from their beginnings as both ethnocentric and scientifically unfounded (For example, Brace, Loring, Gamble, & Bond, 1971; Jencks, Smith, Acland, Bane, Cohen, Gintis, Heyns, & Michelson, 1972).

##### **2. Economic and Social Reproduction Theory**

Economic and social reproduction theory has also had a tremendous impact on educational thinking, particularly since the 1970s. According to this theory, schools serve the interests of the dominant classes by reproducing the economic and social relations of society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Mehan (1989) summarizes the major criticisms of economic and social reproduction theory: the theory is deterministic; it exaggerates the degree of integration between the demands of the capitalist elites and the organization of schooling; and it presents a functionalist's argument similar to what it is trying to replace. The theory assumes a simple cause-effect relationship and does not recognize the dynamic

processes involved in education. Nieto (2000) asserts that social reproduction theories are incomplete as they generally fail to take cultural and psychological issues into account. She suggests that educators need to recognize and emphasize to others that although the social and economic conditions of their students' lives can be significant factors in the academic failure of students, they alone are not the cause of student failure.

### **3. Secondary Cultural Discontinuity Theory**

Ogbu (1987) has developed an explanation of school failure and success that is dependent not only upon a group's cultural background, but also on its situation in the host society and its perceptions of opportunities available in that society. This is called the secondary cultural discontinuity theory (Jacob and Jordan, 1993). Ogbu (1987) suggests that the perceptions of "voluntary immigrants" are drastically different than those of "involuntary minorities". He classifies those who have come to a country on their own free will as in the former category, and those groups who have been incorporated into a society against their will as in the latter.

According to Ogbu (1987), voluntary immigrants in the United States include Europeans, Southeast Asians, Africans, and Central American immigrants. Ogbu (1987) suggests that many members of these groups have a "folk theory" of school success, which is a feeling that they are in a land of opportunity and that they can get ahead through education and hard work. In contrast, involuntary minorities view the folk theory as a myth. They tend to perceive schooling as providing unequal returns. In other words, they may feel that while some may be rewarded for becoming educated, they themselves would not. Involuntary minorities may therefore hold ambivalent attitudes about schooling and success. Ogbu (1987) maintains that involuntary minorities in the United States include American Indians, Africans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans.

According to Ogbu (1987), these perceptions and attitudes towards schooling play a large part in the determination of a student's school success or failure, with voluntary immigrants experiencing much more success and involuntary minorities experiencing much more failure. Ogbu (1987) does acknowledge that the actual history and treatment of particular cultural groups in a society are also factors in this determination, but only in conjunction with one's responses to these experiences.

Ogbu (1993) also contends that there are three factors which account for the ability of voluntary minorities to overcome barriers and do well in school. One is that voluntary

minorities see the schools in their new homeland as being far superior to the education available to them in their homeland. Thus, their frame of reference for assessing the new school is the quality of education in their homeland. Secondly, Ogbu (1993) contends that some voluntary minorities believe that they are treated better by the new schools than they would be treated by the schools in their homeland. Third, voluntary immigrants teach their children to accept, internalize, and follow school rules of behaviour. They emphasize the importance of acquiring job-related skills, proficiency in the English language, and basic skills in reading, writing, and math. Further, they tell their children that to succeed in these they must follow the advice of teachers, school counsellors, and other school personnel about rules of behaviour and standard practises for academic success.

There are a number of studies which support Ogbu's (1987) theory. Ogbu (1987) describes a study which found that in Japan students of Korean descent and students from the Buraku caste tend to do quite poorly in school because both are perceived as less valued than the majority population. Ogbu (1987) also points to studies in which it has been found that when members of these groups emigrate to the United States they are as equally successful in school as students from the Japanese minority. Nieto (2000) points out that comparable results have been found among Finns, who do poorly in Swedish schools but quite well in schools in Australia. A study by Matute-Bianchi (1991) found that newly arrived immigrants tended to do better in school and to have higher self-esteem than those from ethnic minority groups born in the United States.

One criticism of Ogbu's (1987) theory is that he places an inordinate responsibility on students without taking into account conditions outside their control which also affect their school performance (Nieto, 2000). Others have pointed out that the typology is too dichotomous and that some ethnic groups share elements of both voluntary immigrants and involuntary minorities (Gibson, 1997). Perhaps the greatest criticism of the theory is its inability to account for intra-group variability (Gibson, 1997). Gibson (1997) contends that the theory gives no account as to why some involuntary minorities do well in school, while others do not.

The research supporting secondary cultural discontinuity theory and the criticisms of this theory presented above indicate that, while there may be elements of the theory which may account for the academic achievement of some groups of students, there must be other factors involved. It is necessary to consider other theories and approaches for a more comprehensive explanation.

#### **4. Cultural Incompatibilities Theory**

Critics of the genetic inferiority and cultural deprivation theory have pointed out that what some may consider “deficits” are more accurately described as “differences” (Cummins, 1984). Theory for low achievement levels in students from diverse cultural groups which focus on home and school differences or discrepancies grew in popularity during the 1980s and 1990s (McLaughlin, 1992; Nieto, 2000; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998; Portes, 1996). Cummins (1984) identified different interaction patterns that are required of students in their home and in their school as “cultural mismatch” (p.114). Nieto (2000) refers to the lack of congruence between home and school cultures as “cultural discontinuities” or “cultural incompatibilities” (p.236). Nieto (2000) states that, according to these explanations, “the more that students’ experiences, skills, and values differ from the school setting, the more failure they will experience” (p.236).

There is an abundance of literature and research which supports cultural incompatibilities theory. Cummins (1984) points to studies which show that when the literacy materials to which children are initially exposed reflect their own language and experiences and allow them to share these experiences with interested others (e.g. peers, teacher), “cultural mismatch” is reduced and children’s self-esteem is enhanced. According to Cummins (1984), this results in greater school success.

An extensive review of the research and literature on the education of American Indian students by Deyhle and Swisher (1997) supports the theory of cultural incompatibilities. Deyhle and Swisher (1997) concluded that the primary reason for these students leaving school was their perceptions that school was not connected to their lives. On the other extreme, the general academic success of many South Asian students in North America is often explained by pointing to the congruency between their cultural values and the academic culture of schools on that continent (Lee, 1999). Nieto (2000), however, contends that there are other relevant factors which must be taken into consideration in the explanation of the academic success of many South Asian students. These include the facts that most South Asian parents have considerably more education than parents from most other ethnic groups and that they are also the highest proportion born in the United States compared to other immigrants.

Cultural incompatibilities theory has been used to justify the development of culturally homogenous schools with culture specific curriculum. It is important, however, to note criticisms of ethnic specific schools. Nieto states: “Culturally separate schools may

effectively isolate themselves from receiving some of the benefits of the public school system that might help them meet the needs of the children they serve.” (Nieto, 2000, p.152).

Nieto (2000) also points out that there are a number of ways students can contend with differences between their home and school cultures. One common response is for them to deny the importance of their home culture in their school setting (Nieto, 2000). Several studies have been completed on the phenomenon of racial minority students “acting white” in order to cope with home-school culture clashes (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Gibbs & Huang, 1998; Mahiri, 1998). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) performed a study in a high school in the District of Columbia in which African-American students felt that doing well in school meant that they were “acting white”. Portes (1996) points out that while some students who do try and identify more with American ways may experience fewer academic difficulties in school, these students are not necessarily the most successful ones. The burden of “acting white” is a difficult one for high achieving culturally diverse students to cope with (Ogbu, 1995).

### **5. Resistance Theory**

Another way for students to contend with differences between home and school cultures is to resist assimilation (Nieto, 2000). Resistance to learning has been articulated by a number of scholars, including Giroux (1983), Erickson (1993), Cummins (1996) and Kohl (1994). Erickson (1987) maintains that cultural differences may easily cause initial school misunderstandings and failures, but that when they become entrenched over time, not learning, a consistent pattern of refusing to learn, becomes the outcome of schooling. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found this tendency in underachieving students, who decided either consciously or unconsciously to avoid “acting white”. Ogbu (1995) reports on this same phenomenon in American Indian students. He maintains that many have a tendency to resist adopting and following school rules of behaviour. The resistance to acquiring and demonstrating the culture and cognitive styles identified with the dominant group is also referred to as “cultural inversion” (Freire, 1970,1981).

Resistance theory has focused on students who are performing poorly in school; they may be failing to attend in class, failing to do homework, holding negative attitudes towards schoolwork, developing poor relationships with teachers, misbehaving, vandalizing, or exhibiting violence (Fine, 1991). Fine (1991) suggests that the most extreme form of refusing education is dropping out. In her study in a large urban school in the United States

she concluded that having a political stance of resistance was one of the major reasons for students' decisions to leave school.

Past research has thus indicated that those who are most resistive of school culture may experience academic difficulties. The nature of this relationship, however, still requires clarification. Furthermore, there is recent research providing growing evidence that "the more that students are involved in resisting assimilation while maintaining their culture and language, the more successful they will be in school" (Nieto, 2000, p. 290). Deyhle's (1995) research with Navajo students, for instance, found that those students who were able to maintain their cultural connections and to develop what she termed "cultural integrity" were the most academically successful students. Portes and Rumbaut (1996) reached a similar conclusion in their study of immigrant students in American schools. In this study having a positive and enduring sense of cultural heritage was found to be positively related to educational achievement.

Other research has also found that students who are allowed and encouraged to identify with their native languages and cultures in their schools and communities are likely to have higher self concepts and to do better in school. For example, Abi-Nader (1990) examined a successful college preparatory programme for Hispanic students which addressed the students' cultural meanings. In the programme school success became incorporated into the group's self-image. The teacher set high standards and expectations, stressed the strengths and contributions of the students' Hispanic heritage, and talked of his own appreciation for and identification with his students. Ultimately, the programme helped students see academic success as compatible with their cultural identities, and the students in turn performed at high academic levels.

Stachowski (1998) describes the American Indian Reservation Project which has been offered to student teachers at the Indiana University in Bloomington. The student teachers are encouraged to promote Native-American culture, values, and language in their classroom instruction at reservation schools. Stachowski (1998) reports that these efforts have been positively linked to increased self-esteem and academic performance levels in the Navajo students attending reservation schools in Indiana.

Cultural incompatibility and resistance theory thus suggest different outcomes of students' identification with, and maintenance of, their native culture and language. The research presented above indicates that while it can be detrimental to academic success, in other cases it can have a positive influence on self-esteem and on learning. It must be

stressed that the vast majority of educators throughout the world today teach in pluralistic classrooms. Methods for including the culture of students from various ethnic groups in curriculum development are readily available (See for example Irvine, Armento, Causey, Jones, Frasher, and Weinburgh, 2001). Some countries have adopted inclusive and transformative curriculum practices to varying degrees (Banks, 2001; Cushner, 1998). The debate over whether these practices or a standard, universal curriculum is best for all students is likely to continue in most countries well into the future (Cushner, 1998). Continued research on cultural incompatibility and resistance theory will be useful in this controversial issue.

#### **6. Bicultural Developmental or Negotiation Theory**

Cultural mismatch and cultural incompatibilities theories suggest that how students view their ethnicity impacts on their achievement, and vice versa. More recent theory of academic achievement in culturally diverse students is expanding on the notion that beliefs about ethnicity may be related to children's school achievement (Okagaki, Frensch & Dodson, 1996). This newer theory also takes into account key criticisms of cultural incompatibilities theory in its assumption that cultural differences between home and school necessarily create difficulties and problems (Phelan et al., 1998). Another criticism is that it tends to overlook or obscure differences within ethnic groups (Tabachnick & Bloch, 1995; Trueba, 1988).

Addressing these criticisms, researchers began to examine the anthropology of education in a different way. Hoffman (1988) summarizes the key concepts behind the newly emerging theory. She states:

Though cultural differences play a significant role in interaction, the cultural decision to accept, adopt, reject, or reformulate a cultural orientation as a result of cross-cultural contact is a central educational issue that needs to be examined from a perspective emphasizing learning rather than conflict. If individuals and groups engaged in a process of cross-cultural interaction are primarily involved in inventing and acquiring symbolic structures that act as intercultural bridges toward the acquisition of a different system of cultural meanings, the sort of cultural identity that results may in fact be the essential yet unexplored dimension in our conceptualization of learning processes. It remains for the anthropology of education to forge new

ground in the ways we conceptualize this learning in the fabric of a culturally plural society (p. 178).

In her study of Iranian immigrant students in American schools Hoffman (1988) describes the most successful students as those who appreciated some aspects of American culture and adopted “the good things”, while rejecting the bad. At the same time they maintained the good traits of Iranian culture. They were flexible in their adaptation. She suggests this supports a bicultural developmental approach to the academic achievement of culturally diverse students.

The recognition of students developing bicultural identities and the ways that this impacts on their school achievement is at the centre of the newly emerging theory (Okagaki, Frensch & Dodson, 1996). Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (1995) refer to transcultural identities. Phelan et al. (1998) refer to students living in multiple worlds and negotiating and acting upon the borders between them. Pollock and Van Reken (1999) refer to children who grow up or spend a significant part of their childhood living in a country with a culture different from that of their parents as “Third Culture Kids”. They suggest that when students immigrate they develop their own cultures distinct from the dominant group and their parents. The new terminology acknowledges that culturally diverse students simultaneously live in two or more social worlds. The newly emerging theory suggests that with this acknowledgement educators may be better able to help children adapt to their school roles and “to succeed in their role as creators of a way of life that reflects the traditions, values, and languages of both their home and school cultures” (Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993, p.52).

Cummins (1993) is among the theorists working with the newly forming concepts. He has developed a framework for understanding the success or lack of success of minority students. This framework involves three primary factors: the place of the student in the school, the use of heritage language, and home-school relations. One of Cummins’ primary assertions is that if students believe that learning English and learning to be Canadian is complementing their existing cultural and linguistic heritage rather than replacing it, then they are more likely to do better. They do not feel that their identity is threatened by changes or additions they may gain from new knowledge and/or experiences.

Cummins (1996) contends that at the heart of student learning is the interactions between educators and students, and that these interactions always entail a process of “negotiating identities”. He states, “The ways in which student-teacher identities are

negotiated in classroom and school interactions play a major role in determining students' orientation to self and their orientation to academic effort" (Cummins, 1996, p.iv).

Much of the new theory has been derived from what students themselves have said about their schooling experiences. Phelan, Davidson & Cao (1992) suggest that such research details the stated perspectives of students and their interpretation of circumstances and events that impinge on their lives and their ability to connect with educational settings. Phelan et al. (1998) have used this type of research to develop a framework focusing on students' transition and adaptation patterns and the borders they face. They hope that the framework may ultimately be used for informing the way in which instructional settings can best be organized to enable students to successfully navigate their worlds.

Newer research described earlier indicating that culturally diverse parents can help their children to succeed by maintaining their culture supports the idea that students develop or negotiate multiple identities (i.e. Gibson, 1987). As similar research is carried out and as more research examining student perspectives is undertaken, this new theory on the academic achievement of culturally diverse students is likely to expand.

## **B. Other Variables**

The theories presented above have all been identified as erroneous, inadequate, or incomplete. Furthermore, many variables which have been linked to the academic achievement of culturally diverse students are not adequately addressed in the presented theories. The research and literature on the variables identified by the students in the current study as most important to their academic achievement is thus now presented. These variables include language, family, peers, school and racism.

### **1. Language**

While the number of studies which center on the perspectives of students themselves is scant, those that have been undertaken indicate that language is among their greatest concerns. For example, a study by Tanners (1997) examined immigrant students' experiences in two different New York City public schools and asked them to identify the areas they perceived as problematic. Each of the eight students interviewed in one school spoke about the language difficulties they were having and how this negatively affected their new schooling experiences. Similarly, students at the other school reported that the most

dramatic change for them was the language, and that communicating with teachers and other students was a primary obstacle blocking their success in school.

In a phenomenological study involving immigrant students in Vancouver (Canada) high schools, Anderson (2002) found that language presented the students with multiple challenges. Anderson describes poignantly the effects of an English language deficiency on these students. He states it “brought with it feelings of fear, frustration, embarrassment, inferiority, anger, confusion, ridicule, exclusion, and sheer loneliness. It affected their identity and their learning. Everything seemed to hinge on their ability to speak, write and comprehend English” (Anderson, 2002, p.109). The students spoke of how lack of English affected their ability to broaden the knowledge they had brought with them, kept them apart from their peers, and caused them to struggle to meet their teachers’ expectations.

Some of the work of Cummins has been presented above. Cummins (1984, 1991a, 1991b, 1996), is a world leader in second language learning and literacy who has done an extensive investigation of research and literature focusing on the influences of language on the academic performance of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Cummins (1984) generalizes that it takes five to seven years for immigrant students from non-English speaking backgrounds to catch up in English proficiency. He says studies have found that students who have been in Canada for three years were approximately one standard deviation behind grade norms despite the fact that after three years most have become relatively fluent in English conversational skills.

Cummins’s work suggests that the longer students are in Canada the greater their level of English proficiency. Other research backs this notion. For example, Gibson (1987) examined the school performance of immigrant minorities attending a high school in the United States. A strong relationship between age on arrival in the country and students’ performance in high school was ascertained. Cummins (1984) also makes the distinction between surface and deep language. He suggests that school personnel must make the distinction between the development of conversational or surface fluency in English and cognitive/academic aspects of English proficiency. They need to acknowledge that although learning English is essential to children’s eventual academic success, learning language and becoming literate is a long and complex process and should not be rushed (Alvarez, Barton, Clark, Keenan, Lalyre, MacNeill & O’Brien, 1992).

In a study being undertaken in the Vancouver school system, Gunderson (2004) has interviewed close to twenty-five thousand immigrant children. Gunderson’s primary

discovery was that regardless of the students' ethnic background or knowledge of English, they all experienced a common dilemma: "Their parents thought that they were better at English than they were". Gunderson (2004) asserts that when immigrant students arrive in Vancouver and regardless of their age, their knowledge of academic English is usually at a Grade 2 level. Gunderson (2004) contends that the fact that these students are pressured by their parents to drop ESL programmes and to perform in the mainstream high school level is the major contributor to the high dropout rates of immigrant students in British Columbia.

It would appear that the parents in Gunderson's study have failed to distinguish between the different levels of English described by Cummins (1984) above. There are also studies which indicate that students themselves are unable or unwilling to make this distinction. Anderson (2002) describes how the students in his study struggled with the concept of surface and deeper language, and how they challenged the notion that it could take them up to five years to master English at the post-secondary level.

There is recent research indicating that students who have good knowledge structure of their home language are better equipped to learn a second language. For example, Cummins (1991a) offers evidence to show that older immigrant students in Canada who receive more years of schooling in their native language do better in school. His interpretation of this finding is that these older immigrant students have a stronger cognitive and academic foundation that facilitates the acquisition of English and supports the learning of grade appropriate content knowledge in English. Gebhard (2003) also ascertains that recent research shows that the processes of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in one's first and second languages are highly interrelated and interdependent.

Cummins (1984) points to several factors which he claims have unjustifiably been linked to the lower performance of second language students. He asserts that the factor most unfairly promoted as a negative influence on minorities' academic achievement levels is bilingualism. He maintains that many studies which suggest that bilingualism exerts a negative influence on children's academic development have severe methodological problems. Furthermore, he points to a number of studies which find bilingualism to be a positive force in children's academic development. Current brain research is also supporting the benefits of bilingualism on cognitive development (Sylwester, 2003).

Another factor which Cummins (1984) has argued has been unjustifiably linked to lower academic achievement levels in minority students is lack of exposure to English in their home environment. After reviewing studies Cummins (1984) maintains that there is no

evidence that minority students academically “at risk” experience difficulty coping with two languages. He further concludes that there are no studies which justify encouraging minority parents to use more English in the home, and that there are some which suggest doing so only serves to lower the quality of parent-child interaction in the home and exposes the children to poor models of English. Cummins (1984) thus stresses that educators can help culturally diverse students by being aware of the positive factors of having more than one language and by encouraging parents to use their first language in the home.

Maintenance of native language in the home is thus regarded as one of the most important things that parents from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds can do to support their children’s academic success (Nieto, 2000). Language is closely tied to family background and characteristics. Other familial variables related to the academic achievement of culturally diverse students will now be examined.

## **2. Family**

O’Donnell & O’Donnell (1995) contend that there is mounting evidence that the individual student’s family may be the most significant single factor in student achievement. Familial factors which have found to be related to student achievement include socioeconomic status; characteristics, perceptions, beliefs and values; parent expectations; religion; school/home communication and support; lack of attention and loneliness; and gender.

### **a. Socioeconomic Status**

One of the factors most commonly linked to the academic achievement of culturally diverse students is family socioeconomic status (Coleman, 1966; Miller, 1995). As described above, economic and social reproductions theory is built on the premise that students from a low socioeconomic home will face insurmountable difficulties in school. Cultural deprivation theory assumes that culturally diverse families are primarily from low socioeconomic statuses and are therefore unable to provide their children with things that would benefit them in school, including such things as safe and comfortable housing and adequate learning materials. Belief in these theories has likely contributed to the fact that until recently there has been no distinction made between cultural diversity and poverty, a claim made by Barrera (1995).

More recent studies have included culturally diverse students from mid to high socioeconomic statuses. These studies have generally found that the higher the student's socioeconomic status, the greater the likelihood they will be successful in school. For example, a study of over two hundred urban early adolescent minority students in Florida found socioeconomic status to be an important factor in academic performance, with higher performance noted for higher income students (Marcon, 1999). Another study of immigrant children being conducted in Vancouver by Gunderson (2004) suggested that socioeconomic status is the determining factor as to why children from some ethnic groups have a much higher graduation rate than others. Gunderson (2004) found that of all the students who graduated from Vancouver high schools in 2000, forty-five per cent who spoke Chinese as their first language got into university compared to only two percent of students who spoke Spanish as their first language. Gunderson (2004) asserts this is because Chinese children living in Vancouver often have more affluent parents than their Spanish speaking counterparts. The research and literature presented below on other familial variables also found to be related to student achievement suggest that Gunderson (2004) has oversimplified the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. Nevertheless, the study does indicate a strong association between the two variables.

Just as the cultural deprivation and social and economic reproduction theories may erroneously suggest that all children from particular ethnic backgrounds do poorly in school, there is a danger that the more recent studies including higher socioeconomic status students may ignore those who are not succeeding. In a study of eleven hundred adolescents with Latino, East Asian, Filipino, and European backgrounds in four middle and high schools in California, only a small portion of school success could be attributed to socioeconomic background (Fuligni, 1997). There is a need to avoid oversimplifying the positive effects of high socioeconomic status and to consider other factors and their interactions that also play a role in the school success of some immigrant children.

#### **b. Characteristics, Perceptions, Beliefs, and Values**

What Fuligni's (1997) study outlined above did find most highly attributable to school success in children from immigrant families was the families' motivation and commitment to succeed in a new society. Fuligni (1997) thus maintains that the encouragement and aspirations of immigrant parents may be the most important ways they can influence their children's education. Matute-Bianchi (1991) and Ogbu (1993) have

pointed out that many immigrant parents encourage their children to overcome the difficulties they may face in school because they believe the educational opportunities in the United States are superior to those available in their home countries.

After an extensive review of the literature, Siu (1992) identified a number of familial factors which have been shown to promote and support the educational achievement of Chinese-American children. These include a family coming voluntarily as labourers instead of slaves; a view that problems are only temporary; a generally optimistic attitude; a belief that things are better in the United States than they are in China; an acceptance of the folk theory of the white middle class; and a trust in white institutions. Studies by Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore (1991), Gibson (1987), Suarez-Orozco (1989), and Waters (1994) all suggest that along with their parents, immigrant students try to overlook the difficulties of their current experiences by comparing them to the often worse situations in their home countries.

Thus, these studies lend support to Ogbu's theory that culturally diverse students who experience success in school often hold the characteristics assigned to what he has termed "voluntary immigrants". There is, however, little explanation for why *all* children from such families are not successful in school. More research exploring the interaction between variables may provide a more thorough explanation. Furthermore, it must be noted that students from involuntary minorities, including those refugees from war and economic deprivation, have been found to attain high levels of educational achievement (Caplan et al., 1991). More information on the characteristics of these students would also aid in a more thorough understanding of why some culturally diverse students succeed while others fail in school.

Studies have found differing beliefs about concepts such as intelligence and academic achievement between immigrant and non-immigrant families. For example, among Mexican-American families, Delgado-Gaitan (1992) found that, notwithstanding the high value placed on academics, the concept of an educated person was much broader than merely being able to complete a school programme. In these homes it was felt that a child that was well educated not only attended school, but was also respectful and cooperative with those around him or her.

In another study, Okagaki & Sternberg (1993) found immigrant parents rated conforming to external standards as being more important to develop in their children than developing autonomous behaviours. In contrast, American-born parents reportedly favoured developing autonomy over conformity. Parents from all groups except Anglo-American

indicated that noncognitive characteristics (i.e., motivation, social skills, and practical school skills) were as important as or more important than cognitive characteristics (i.e., problem-solving skills, verbal ability, and creative ability) were to their conceptions of an intelligent first-grade child. All of the immigrant parents rated learning to do work neatly and orderly as being at least as important as, if not more important than, learning basic facts, developing problem-solving skills, and developing creativity. Anglo-American parents valued autonomy and creativity more than did other parents. The primary finding of this study was a negative overall relation between parental beliefs about conformity to external standards and children's school performance.

A study by Okagaki, Frensch and Gordon (1995) compared the beliefs and self-reported behaviours of parents of high-achieving Mexican-American children with the beliefs and behaviours of parents of low-achieving Mexican American children. The goal was to identify parental beliefs and behaviours that are associated with school success among Mexican American children. On questions about the value of education in general, the importance of a high school diploma for enabling their children to get good jobs, the amount of education they expect their children to attain, whether or not parents should help children with homework, and the frequency at which they helped their children with schoolwork, parents of high and low achievers did not differ. Parents of high achievers were more likely to be upset with grades of Cs and Ds and were more likely to feel that there were many things they could do to help their children do well in school. They thus showed mastery orientation themselves, which their children had adopted. They also modeled reading skills more frequently than parents of low achievers.

This section indicates that familial characteristics, perceptions, beliefs, and values undoubtedly affect student achievement levels. Considering that there is also much interplay amongst these factors, as well as between them and other variables, the complexity of how family background affects student achievement is most evident.

### **c. Parent Expectations**

Okagaki et al.'s (1995) study described above indicates that parents of high achieving students may tend to hold high expectations for their children. Closely tied to family characteristics, perceptions, beliefs and values, parent expectations have received much attention in the research and literature on the academic achievement of culturally diverse students. Studies have found that some teachers assume that families of students from

diverse cultural groups do little to encourage academic success in their children (Chisholm, 1994). Numerous studies indicate, however, that many culturally diverse families, both voluntary immigrants and involuntary minorities, do place a high emphasis on academic achievement. Delgado-Gaitan (1992), for example, studied six Mexican-American families living in a California community. The common thread with all the parents in the study was that they said they cared about their children's education and wanted them to do well. Similarly, Yao (1989) found that most of the Indo-American parents in her study of Indian immigrant learners were found to be extremely concerned about their children's academic work. Rong (1998) found that Asian families in her study placed extreme emphasis on their children to experience academic success in order to elevate their personal and familial status. Garcia (1991) interviewed Latino, American Indian, Asian, and Southeast Asian parents in her study on the education of linguistically and culturally diverse students and found that all indicated or implied that they felt that their children's academic success was vital to these children's future. Many stated that this was the very reason why they had moved to North America. Other studies also indicate that children's education and future were primary reasons in a family's decision to immigrate (for example, Nieto, 2000; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

The studies outlined above thus point out the need for educators to be aware of parents' beliefs about schooling. It has also been shown that students will adopt parental perceptions regarding education. For example, Okagaki et al. (1996) carried out a study which examined children's perceptions of parents' beliefs and the expectations that their parents had of them. They reported that Mexican-American parents' beliefs and expectations about their children's future success were related to their children's perceptions of barriers. In turn, children's perceptions of barriers were related to their attitudes toward school. Okagaki et al. (1996) thus concluded that, besides the need to examine specific parenting beliefs and behaviours that may be more consistent with the ways in which Asian-American and Latino parents view parenting and child development, a greater understanding of children's perceptions of their parents' beliefs, expectations, and behaviours is also needed.

Other studies have also related parental perceptions of education to student perceptions and performance. Ford (1993) found that parents who are perceived by their children as more adamant regarding the importance of education have children who are more optimistic and achievement oriented. Gibson (1987) examined the school adaptation patterns of West Indian youths in the United States. She found that the Punjabi parents reminded

their offspring that they had made great sacrifices for them and that their lives will have been wasted if their children are not successful. This resulted in the higher academic attainment of the youths in the study. Matute-Bianchi (1991) examined the patterns of school performance among immigrant and non-immigrant Mexican-descent students and found that the initiative of higher achieving students was fueled by a perception that their parents placed great expectations on their performance and held high aspirations for their eventual educational attainment. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) have co-directed one of the largest ongoing longitudinal studies of immigrant children and their families in the United States. They found that many students from immigrant families believed that their parents would not be satisfied with merely average grades in school and that the parents hoped that their children would continue their education well beyond high school.

Fuligni's (1997) study outlined above also found a strong relationship between parental factors and student achievement. The first generation adolescents in the study consistently indicated higher values of schooling and educational success. It was found that many of these students invested more time and greater energy into academic endeavors such as studying and seeking extra help. Fuligni (1997) attributed the effort expended by the students to an awareness of the great sacrifice made by their parents so that the children could have better opportunities.

Fuligni's (1997) study indicated that parental expectations are highest for first generation students. Other studies have also found that first generation immigrant parents hold the highest expectations for their children in regards to their education (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001; Siu, 1992). Kao & Tienda (1995) contend that because of its influence on parental expectations, generational status may be the greatest predictor of student achievement.

Findings from the studies outlined above suggest that educators need to be aware of the perceptions of culturally diverse families towards schooling. There is, however, as previously mentioned, also the need for educators to recognize the complexities of this. Okagaki and Frensch (1998) state that telling parents that they need to have higher expectations for their children may not change their expectations, or in turn the expectations and performance of the children. The study by Okagaki & Frensch (1998) on the differences in the relations between beliefs and school achievement across different ethnic groups including Asian-American, Latino, and European American further suggested that educators must not assume that what works for one group of families will necessarily work for another

group. Okagaki and Frensch (1998) suggest that the social and economic context along with the global constellation of beliefs parents hold regarding multiple aspects of life (e.g. the importance of family, principles of child development, education, perspective of work, and their general world view) may make intervention strategies that work in some family contexts ineffective in other family contexts.

While having high expectations is a factor that researchers have found that parents from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds might use to support their children's academic success (Nieto, 2000), they need to use caution when trying to do so. A two year study by Phelan, Yu and Davidson (1994) involved 54 students in four high schools in California. The source of stress most frequently cited by the students in this study was that their parents pressured them to do well in school. Students across types described parents who urged them to raise their grades, do well on tests, complete their homework, or at least pay attention and attend to school matters.

Thus, while high parental expectations can increase the academic performance of some culturally diverse youth, it can also be the cause of student anxiety and stress. The pressure may prompt some students to engage in cheating in order to live up to their parents' expectations. For example, a study by Hemmings (1996) of six African American "model" students revealed they were under pressure to cheat. This is also demonstrated in Cordeiro and Carspecken's (1993) ethnographic study of 20 highly successful Hispanic high school students in Southwestern United States. These students identified school primarily as a route to an occupationally successful future and a way to demonstrate the capacity to rise out of low socio-economic status. Thus doing well at school was most important to them, and they used cheating as a means for doing so. The most common form of cheating reported was copying homework assignments. The students felt that this was necessary because of time pressures they were under, and that this was not really cheating in the strictest sense of the term because homework was rarely graded. Other forms of cheating included copying answers off others' exams during a test, calling out answers when the teacher left the room during a test, changing answers on a quiz when grading it, and changing a friend's answer on a quiz or test when grading it. The students explained that certain teachers deserved to be cheated against because they practised unfair testing policies, failed to teach well, or simply failed to police the classroom sufficiently to prevent cheating.

#### **d. Religion**

Also closely interwoven with familial perceptions, beliefs and values is family religion. There has, however, been little research examining the relationship between individual religious commitment and academic achievement (Ahmad, 2001; Jeynes, 1999). Nevertheless, there has been some recent consideration given to this (Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996), and some studies have found a link between degree of religious commitment and level of academic achievement. For example, Jeynes (1999) evaluated the effects of the individual religious commitment of racial minority children on their academic achievement using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey in the United States collected from 1992 to 1998. He found that religiously committed Black and Hispanic children performed better on most academic measures than their less religious counterparts, even when controlling for socioeconomic status, gender, and whether the student attended a private religious school. Similarly, a study by Koubek (1984) found that among Christian high school students, there was a positive correlation between the degree of religious commitment and academic achievement.

While the few available studies above have found a correlation, there remains a need for studies which attempt to explain it. Jeynes (1999) is one of the few who has suggested possible reasons for the connection between religious commitment and academic achievement. He points to the tendency for religious people to avoid behaviours that are often regarded as undisciplined and harmful to academic achievement, including drug abuse and sexual behaviour. Further studies are however needed to test such hypotheses, and to more closely determine whether high religious commitment and academic achievement are both the result of a cluster of beliefs, attitudes, and values.

#### **e. School/Home Communication and Support**

Cultural incompatibilities theory suggests that home/school differences can lead to lower academic achievement levels. In particular, miscommunication between the home and school has been linked to student difficulties (Cummins, 1984; Nieto, 1999). An example of miscommunication between home and school is found in a study by Delgado-Gaitan (1992). He found that teachers in an American elementary school assumed that a lack of involvement on the part of Mexican parents was due to apathy about their children's education. The study revealed that many of the parents actually felt intimidated by the school and did not understand the culture. A parent organization was formed which focused on helping the

school know more about Mexican families and their culture and on helping the Mexican families know how to help their children in school. The organization was credited with increasing the achievement levels of the Mexican students at this school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992).

Kao & Tienda (1995) suggest that, because of their long work schedules or discomfort with speaking English, foreign-born parents are less likely to become involved in their children's lives through more formal mechanisms such as volunteering at school. Harry (1992) completed an ethnographic study of cross-cultural communication with Puerto Rican-American families in the special education system. He found that the school district's reliance upon formalized, written communication, and resulting obscurity and confusion about the meaning of various events led to mistrust and withdrawal on the part of the parents in his study.

Edwards, Fear, & Gallego (1995) contend that negative school experiences and impersonal and unreceptive school bureaucracies have alienated linguistically and culturally diverse parents. They point out, however, that many mainstream parents also have only a limited involvement in their children's education, often due to obstacles such as work schedules, childcare needs, and other necessities. They state: "Although parents and other family members are important to the success of children, most parents do not go to school unless called, do not attend meetings or volunteer in school activities, and generally are not members of parent organizations" (Edwards et al., 1995, p.149). Lindeman (2001) also points out that the rule in many cultures, including many European ones, is that "there's no problem unless the school contacts me" (p.65). It is not just parents of culturally diverse students who are not visibly present at the school; however it is these parents who are most often criticized in this regard. This criticism may be linked to misunderstanding of cultural differences, as is suggested by cultural incompatibilities theory outlined previously. There is also a great deal of evidence pointing to the existence of institutional racism in Canadian schools (Alladin, 1996), which is sadly, but undoubtedly, another cause for such criticism.

Delgado-Gaitan (1992) found that the quality of parents' instrumental help on schoolwork was a function of parents' educational background and familiarity with the school system. He found that the quantity and quality of parent-child interactions involving homework were directly related to parents' cultural knowledge about school. Similarly, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) contend that highly educated parents are better equipped to guide their children in how to study, structure an essay, and access information

for school projects, and they may also provide more resources such as additional books, a home computer, and even tutors. More educated parents typically are in a better position to navigate the intricacies of the new school system. These parents are more likely to know the right questions to ask and will insist that their children be placed in educational programmes that will ensure viable options in the future.

Much of the research supporting the importance of immigrant parents' practical knowledge about school and on context-specific differences between minority and majority cultures that affect classroom activities has been done with elementary school children (For e.g.: Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Goldenberg, 1987; Vogt, Jordan & Tharp, 1987; Weisner, Gallimore, & Jordan, 1988). Okagaki et al. (1995) point out that adolescents are less dependent on parents for help with homework. Moreover, adolescents are better able cognitively to recognize societal factors that affect their parents' and their own economic and social mobility and may be more likely to develop strategies in opposition to majority cultural practises. The importance of communication and support involving parents of adolescents and their schools thus requires further research.

#### **f. Lack of Attention and Loneliness**

In the largest longitudinal study of immigrant children and their families conducted in the United States, co-directors Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) found that only 20 percent of the children in their sample came to the United States as a family unit. Most of the children were separated from one or both parents for a few months to a few years. There is, however, little research on how such separation may affect children at school. In her study of West Indian immigrants to the United States, Waters (1999) found that international family separations are often viewed as a symptom of a pathological family situation. She stated that professionals, including teachers, often misinterpret the social meanings of separations and are quick to label absent parents as not caring about or being properly attached to their children. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) state that much will depend on whether the child feels neglected or abandoned or, conversely, views the separation as necessary to the well-being of the family.

Having the support of significant others such as a parent, older sibling, or extended family member can help all students to be more successful. This notion finds support in many studies, including one examining the educational and cultural adjustment of English as

a Second Language (ESL) students to high school in Calgary, Canada (Watt, Roessingh & Bosetti, 1996).

Without support and guidance, adolescents may turn to behaviours known to be detrimental to school success, such as gangs and/or drugs (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Other ways students have been found to respond to lack of attention and support include copying other students' work, creating disruptions in class, or withdrawing quietly from the class (Howard, 2001; Phelan, Yu & Davidson, 1994).

The issues of lack of attention and loneliness may be more of a concern for culturally diverse students because they are more likely to be separated from family members as described above. Furthermore, children of immigrants often have parents who are unable to guide them through the daunting obstacle course of adolescence in a culture they are unfamiliar with (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). For example, an ethnographic study of post-revolution Iranian women from metropolitan Vancouver (Dossa, 2001) powerfully demonstrates the impact of immigration on their souls (*Salamat-e Ruh*). These women were shown to be struggling inwardly and it was evident that many would not be in a position to be able to support their children through their new school and life experiences.

#### **g. Gender**

Many studies have shown that immigrant girls tend to outperform immigrant boys (Fuligni, 1997; Kao and Tienda, 1995). Olneck and Lazerson (1974) have demonstrated that research shows that since the beginning of this century, among most ethnic groups, immigrant girls tended to complete more years of school than their male counterparts. Brandon (1991) analyzed census data and found that Asian American females reach higher levels of educational attainment than males. Waters (1997) found that girls are more likely than boys to complete high school in her study of Caribbean-origin youth in New York.

Research has shown that in general immigrant families treat their boys and girls quite differently. While boys may be encouraged to venture into the new world, girls and young women are more likely to be restricted in the home and given far more responsibilities there (Valenzuela, 1999; Waters, 1997; Smith 1999). The activities of girls outside the home also tend to be heavily monitored and controlled (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). These restrictions have been credited with protecting girls from violence or gang-related activities (Smith, 1999). Furthermore, immigrant girls have been found to be less likely to engage in

substance abuse and other risky behaviours (Hernandez & Charney, 1998). These activities and behaviours have been linked to school performance.

Another reason as to why immigrant girls are more academically successful than boys has been offered. Because immigrant girls are more restricted by their parents than are boys, the girls tend to view their time in school as a social experience and as a period of relative freedom (Olsen, 1998). They may thus feel more positive about school and therefore may be more seriously engaged in learning (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Despite studies such as Brandon's (1991) and Waters (1997) outlined above, there remains a strong societal notion that many immigrant families discourage their daughters from remaining in school. There have, however, been studies which call this stereotype into question. For example, Ahmad's (2001) study of British Muslim women found that their parents played a major role in encouraging and motivating their daughters into higher education. The education of their daughters was seen as an investment, symbolizing that their value, both within the family and to those outside it, went beyond patriarchal ideologies of women as homemakers. By encouraging their daughters into higher education, parents were not only able to rest assured by their daughter's future economic potential as individuals, but they were also able to attain and maintain social status and prestige within their social circles. It was found that educated daughters signaled certain levels of liberalism for the family concerned, and made them be seen as more "modern" and "socially astute".

### **3. Peers**

A study of 1,100 adolescents in the United States with Latino, East Asian, Filipino, and European backgrounds found that successful students had a network of friends who assisted each other with homework, studied together for tests, and generally encouraged each other to do well (Fuligni, 1997). The researcher of this study asserted that peers may be especially important for students from immigrant families.

Hoffman (1988) found the Iranian youth in her study consistently stuck together and away from members of other ethnic groups. Phelan, Davidson, and Cao (1992) report that "In almost all schools students segregate themselves, at least to some extent, by ethnicity and social class" (p.702). Phelan et al. (1992) found in their study that there seems to be more fluid movement between boundaries for culturally diverse students who had been in school longer.

Resistance theory, as described earlier, suggests that there is a tendency in underachieving culturally diverse students to avoid “acting white” (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). Research has shown that there may be a strong peer pressure for culturally diverse students, particularly males, to reject school (Fordham, 1996; Gibson, 1988; Smith, 1999). Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) point out that behaviours that gain respect with peers often bring boys in conflict with their teachers and to receiving failing grades. Those who reject school are more likely to become involved in gang and criminal activity (McLaren, 1994). Youth gangs in the Vancouver area are often formed on the basis of ethnicity. Seifi (2004) notes that in addition to gangs of Indo- and Asian-Canadian gangs, Iranian-Canadian youth have now formed gangs in British Columbia.

At the other end of the spectrum are those adolescents who consciously and/or unconsciously sense that they have to give up aspects of their identities and of their indigenous cultural system in order to achieve success as defined in dominant-group terms. Fordham also refers to this phenomenon as “acting white” or “raceless”. Following her initial study of achievement in thirty-three Black students at a high school in Washington, D.C., Fordham (1988) closely examined the data on six of the twelve students identified as high-achieving. According to Fordham (1988), all six of these students “learned the value of appearing to be raceless – a clear example of internalizing oppression – in their efforts to ‘make it’” (p. 80). In other words, Fordham asserts, there is a link between racelessness and school success.

Fordham (1988) also suggested that racelessness among the Black adolescents in her study may have been influenced by gender, with the female high achieving students appearing to be more willing to be closely identified with the values and beliefs of the dominant social system than their male counterparts. Fordham (1988) suggested that female students tend to internalize the values, beliefs, and ideals taught and learned in school, making them a part of their behaviour pattern in their family and community environments. In this way, racelessness becomes a definite part of their lives, creating enormous stress and anxiety. Moreover, this raceless response to the duality of their existence puts social distance between them and their less successful peers, enabling them to pursue goals and objectives that, under the scrutiny and careful eyes of their peers, might be severely criticized. This response also undermines group solidarity.

Fordham (1988) also found the female high achievers vacillated between inconspicuous among their less successful peers and carefully constructed racelessness in the

presence of their teachers and other representatives of the dominant society. Fordham (1988) asserted that the raceless personae they presented appeared to be mandated by the school – the price they paid for desiring to achieve vertical mobility. These students understood that the school and their teachers expected them to distance themselves from the “Black” aspects of their home, peers, and immediate community in ways that suggested an individualistic orientation toward success and social mobility.

Fordham (1988) found that presenting a raceless persona appeared to be much more difficult for the male students in her sample group. When compared with the female students, the high achieving males appeared to be less committed to the cultural system of the larger society and far more confused and ambivalent about the value of forsaking their indigenous beliefs and values. She found that the uncertainty and the resultant conflict forced these males to question their identity repeatedly. Fordham (1988) also suggests that this confusion was responsible for a higher victimization in school of male high achievers than that suffered by their female counterparts.

A study of six high-achieving black juniors in the United States (Hemmings, 1996) also found gender to have a strong influence on their self identities and on student peer groups’ cultural norms. Social class and familial backgrounds were also found to be powerful influencers on the way these students viewed themselves. Interestingly, all six of these students shared the same image of a good or “model” student. These students, however, each formed and performed identities as model students, as black persons, and as other selves in their responses to what they all perceived to be conflicting images of who they ought to be. This lends support to the bicultural developmental theory of academic achievement in culturally diverse students.

In another study conducted by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), they found that successful students who were accepted by their peers also were either very successful in sports or had found another way to hide their academic achievement.

Developmental theory indicates that adolescents generally begin to move away from their family and to turn more to their peers during the process of gaining independence. How they view themselves both independently and in relation to their peers has tremendous impact on who they are as learners, as this section has demonstrated.

#### **4. School**

##### **I. Teachers**

###### **a. Teacher Hiring and Training**

The demographics in Canadian schools have changed considerably in the past decade (Statistics Canada, 2001). It is important that schools reflect the community's composition, as well as provide positive role models for all students (Codjoe, 2001). A study by Zirkel (2002) found that having same race and gender role models was "significantly and consistently predictive of a greater investment in achievement concerns" on the part of young people. Despite this knowledge, the culture gap between teachers and students has never been greater (Howard, 2001). Many of the students who make up today's school population come from families whose language and culture differ markedly from those of their teachers. Alladin (1996) contends that many Black youths in Canada make a direct connection between the problem of student disengagement and the lack of representation of Black role models in the schools. He maintains that students want to see more minority teachers in the Canadian school system.

Not only are most preservice teachers not from culturally diverse groups, but many lack the knowledge, skills, and experience that build the necessary professional assurance for working with minority children (Chisholm, 1994). On top of this, very few teacher-training institutions offer courses in cultural sensitivity and multicultural education (Anderson, 2002). Many teachers express reservations about their ability to teach students from a culture different from their own (Association of Teacher Educators, 1991; Hadaway, Florez, Larke, & Wiseman, 1993). This insecurity contributes to many teachers' aversion to teaching in schools with culturally diverse populations (Chisholm, 1994). Thus, according to Gay (1995), the ultimate challenge for teacher educators is to prepare teachers who connect meaningfully with their students in a culturally complex world.

###### **b. Beliefs**

###### **Expectations**

Olstad, Foster, and Wyman (1983) indicate that teachers lacking multicultural education training are inadequately prepared for the reality of a pluralistic society and that they tend to have low expectations for minority or bicultural children. A substantial amount of research has been carried out on the negative effects of teachers having low expectations for students. Perhaps the most commonly known effect is what Merton in 1948 termed the

“self-fulfilling prophecy”, which means that students perform in ways that teachers expect (Banks and Banks, 2001). Another early study conducted on teacher expectations was carried out by Rosenthal & Jacobson (1968). More recent studies confirm the negative effects of low teacher expectations. Proctor (1984), for instance, found that “teachers are less apt to direct instruction to low-expectation students, are less likely to tolerate non-attending behaviour on the part of such students, and tend to place fewer demands on them for classroom performance, homework assignments, and overall academic effort” (p.469).

Studies have thus shown that teacher’s expectations influence students’ perceptions of themselves as learners, and that this affects their performance. Studies have also shown that a student’s social class, race or ethnicity is a major determinant of teacher expectations (Codjoe, 2001). In his summary of the research findings in the United States, Darder (1991) concluded that teachers are more likely to hold negative expectations for low-class and bicultural children than for middle-class white children. Darder (1991) maintained that studies have found expectations are related to teacher behaviours and to student cognitive changes even when intelligence quotients and achievement are controlled. He determined that teacher expectations are affected by testing and tracking procedures, which he maintains are themselves biased against low-class and bicultural children. Darder (1991) also points to studies which indicate that lower-class and bicultural children appear to be more influenced by teacher expectations than are those students whom teachers have positive expectations for.

Proctor’s (1984) study provides a specific example of the difficulties culturally diverse students may face due to negative or low teacher expectations. He concluded that black children and children from minority ethnic communities are perceived as ‘problems’ rather than potentially enriching to school life, with teachers having lower expectations of their abilities and potential achievements. Proctor (1984) found that low expectations of pupils were associated with minority group membership, non-conforming personality and non-standard speech. Other studies indicate that there is also a tendency to encourage black pupils’ sporting and musical abilities to the detriment of their academic studies (Brah & Minhas, 1985; Phoenix, 1987).

In addition to the negative influences of low expectations for culturally diverse students, educators must also be aware of the power of holding high expectations for these students. In their research on six high schools that were successful with Latino students, Lucas, Henze and Donato (1990) found that the most significant factor in explaining their success was the belief held by the educators that all students were capable of learning.

While educators should be aware of the power of holding high expectations for their students, it is important for them not to tie such expectations to race or ethnicity. It may appear that in some ways “positive stereotypes” can be used as a means to increase the academic achievement of some students. For example, in the “model-minority” stereotype all Asian students are thought to excel in school, have few adjustment problems, and need little help. This thinking, however, can be damaging for a number of reasons. Nieto (2000) maintains that it can lead teachers to believe that students with Asian backgrounds are a homogeneous group; it can be used as a standard against which all other groups are measured; it discredits the legitimate demands for social justice made by other groups; it may place severe demands on students through teachers who have unreasonable expectations of their academic abilities; and it is used to assuage the guilt of those who do little to help Asian students because it perpetuates the belief that this community “takes care of their own”, and does not need any help.

### Colour-blind Perspective

Besides holding harmful expectations for culturally diverse students, teachers without multicultural education training may also believe that all people are the same in spite of race or culture (Darder, 1991). Banks and Banks (2001) suggest that teachers with such beliefs tend to take a “colour-blind perspective” to education. It has also been called a “one size fits all” approach to teaching (Howard, 2001). Teachers with a colour-blind perspective to education deny their culturally diverse students their rights to define who they are and the experiences they bring to school, as was found in a study with Black students in Canada (Codjoe, 2001). These teachers are likely to hold the view that their country is a place where all cultures have or should be attempting to have, melted together to form one culture. Solomon (1992) states that despite Canada’s policy of multiculturalism, dominant-group educators continue to embrace an ethnocentric approach to pedagogy within schools. Although the official policy is multiculturalism, the dominant teaching paradigm within Canadian classrooms is cultural assimilation. Solomon (1992) maintains that teachers are socializing racial and ethnic minority children into the dominant, mainstream culture.

Many multicultural theorists, including Banks & Banks (2001), Bennett (1999), and Nieto (1999, 2000) agree that the colour-blind approach ignores the reality of cultural differences between students which need to be addressed for a number of important reasons. First, treating all students in the same way can perpetuate inequality (Nieto, 2000). Teachers

need to understand that treating everyone the same is not the same as treating everyone fairly (Codjoe, 2001; LaRocque, 1999). This was acknowledged by the United States Supreme Court in the Lau (1974) decision. The Court maintained that giving non-English speaking students the same teachers, instruction, and materials as English-speaking students was not providing students with an equal education (Lau v Nichols, 1974).

Secondly, the existence of cultural differences must be acknowledged or little can be done to eradicate discrimination and racism (Alladin, 1996). Thirdly, teachers who fail to respond to student diversity miss opportunities to use instructional materials and approaches that reflect the interests and life experiences of students from diverse groups. Such opportunities are known to increase the academic achievement of culturally diverse students (Ramsey, 1998).

Lastly, teachers with the belief that all people are the same regardless of their culture may also misinterpret behaviours of students from diverse cultures. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations of students' cultural characteristics are more likely to manifest themselves in a multitude of punitive actions in schools such as suspension, expulsion, and other disciplinary actions (Howard, 2001). Alladin (1996) provides an example of this in his description of non-Native teachers' misinterpretation of the cultural attitudes and beliefs of Native students. According to Alladin (1996), Native students generally regard eye contact as disrespectful whereas whites see it as a sign of confidence and trustworthiness. This trait has been interpreted by white teachers as an indicator that the student is not trustworthy, is guilty of something, or is simply not paying attention. The result is that the Native student is more likely to be sanctioned in some way. Alladin (1996) also suggests that Native students tend to receive harsher punishment than their white classmates. Darder (1991) similarly concludes that teachers tend to be more severe in disciplining black students.

In a study centering on elementary school administrators in Burnaby, Canada, it was pointed out that when the school serves a highly diverse community it is difficult for school administrators to anticipate what actions might unintentionally cause offence. It was, however, deemed important by the administrators to work towards getting that information (LaRocque, 1999).

### **c. Caring and Understanding**

A study by Howard (2001) examined African-American students' perceptions of culturally relevant teaching. The attribute most frequently mentioned by the students about

what created an optimal learning environment was their teachers' willingness to care about them and their ability to bond with them. Similarly, in Phelan et al.'s (1992) study a recurring theme in students' comments was the tremendous value they placed on having teachers who cared. They also found differences in the way high- and low- achieving students defined caring behaviour. High achievers associated caring with assistance in academic matters, while low-achieving students equated it with certain personality traits and a readiness to give person-to-person assistance. Phelan et al. (1992) concluded: "The perception of teachers as caring or not appears to have direct consequences – particularly for low-achieving students. If a teacher is viewed as not caring, students report a lack of incentive to do schoolwork or to participate in class" (p.698).

A goal for caring teachers to work towards is to develop a greater understanding of their own students' lives outside of school (Coelho, 1998; Hollins & Oliver, 1999). Research consistently reveals that teachers who have the most knowledge about their students' cultural backgrounds are the most successful in helping them learn (Jasmine, 1995; Saracho & Spodek, 1995; Schlosser, 1992). For example, in his study of African-American students, Howard (2001) found that one of the primary keys to helping these students have an equitable opportunity for school success was the teachers' understanding of various cultural and learning characteristics they bring to the classroom. After an extensive review of culturally compatible education, Tharp (1989) concluded that when schools become more attuned to children's cultures, children's academic achievement improves.

Teachers who know and respect the different cultures of the children in their classrooms are in the best position to accept, validate, and acknowledge the experiences, languages, and traditions of linguistically or culturally diverse students (Midobuche, 1999). This enables them to serve as what are identified by Gentemann and Whitehead (1983) as "cultural translators" and "cultural brokers". According to these researchers, these roles allow teachers to mediate between majority and minority cultures. They help minority students understand, adapt, and thrive in the academic and majority culture. At the same time, the teacher as cultural broker helps the school understand, adapt to, and serve all students. The teacher as cultural broker thus lessens the cultural mismatch, thereby empowering students to succeed both academically and socially in school and the larger society.

Similarly, Nieto (1999) sees the role of the teacher as what she identifies as "cultural accommodator and mediator" as being fundamental in promoting student learning. She

maintains that the way students are thought about and treated by the schools they attend and the educators who teach them is fundamental in creating academic success or failure. According to Nieto (2000), rather than blaming students for failure to learn, teachers as cultural accommodators and mediators look beyond individuals to such conditions as irrelevant curriculum, poor teaching, ineffective bureaucracies and social injustices.

Teachers who are able to accommodate and mediate cultural factors are thus in the greatest position to help their culturally diverse students to experience success. In many studies culturally diverse students have pointed out the helpfulness their teachers display towards them. For example, in Tanner's (1997) study of immigrant students in New York, the majority of student participants said they liked their teachers, stating that they were nice and very helpful. Howard (2001) had similar findings in his study of African-American students. In a study by Martinez, Scott, Cranston-Gingras, and Platt (1994), the vast majority of students from migrant farm worker families recalled a teacher who was especially helpful to them.

In addition to teachers, school counsellors are in a position to be most helpful to culturally diverse students. They need to be aware of the importance of value clarification, respect, self-identity with certain groups, and the effect one's approach has on students from different cultures (Anderson, 2002). In Anderson's (2002) study one student felt that counsellors are not particularly helpful or sympathetic to the immigrant student, saying that they prefer to help "Canadian" students.

## **II. School Differences**

The cultural incompatibilities theory described earlier points out many of the differences between home and school cultures that culturally diverse students contend with. This section will therefore focus on research on what some immigrant students themselves feel are among the major differences between their old and new schools. Anderson (2002) asked immigrant students in an inner-city high school in Vancouver about this. The students said that what they first observed in their new schools was what they considered to be a general lack of respect for one's elders and for those in authority. Later, as they came to know the students and their teachers, they saw that some of what shocked them was a more relaxed way of interacting which, in turn, fostered a sense of 'inquiry learning' instead of the 'cramming' to which they were accustomed. The students generally appreciated 'choice' and the opportunity to take new courses in the visual and performing arts and in career education.

Despite their contention that the work was easier in Canada, all participants felt that they were actually learning more because there was less pressure to excel amid a greater opportunity to expand their knowledge through a broader range of subjects.

Tanners (1997) contends that the majority of studies have found that many immigrant students are used to more structure and stricter discipline than their new schools in North America offer. In her study of immigrant students in New York City schools, she identified a pattern most of the students followed. They came into their new schools eager to learn, and then went into shock at the differences from their old schools. They then tended to embrace the mass culture, influenced by peers and mass media campaigns of what it is to be a successful individual. They were tempted by the new sense of freedom they felt, and many began to act in ways detrimental to their school success (Tanners, 1997).

Garman (1997) conducted ten interviews with Arab, Islamic mothers who had children in the Alberta public school system. These parents commented on the teachers' lack of power and authority in the classroom, and the effect this had on learning. The study also provides good insight on how these Arab students felt about their school and its culture. The differences in dress and the attitudes of teachers were the dominant themes in the interviews. Students complained of feeling isolated and ignored by their teachers. The mothers stressed the importance of teachers understanding different cultures and respecting the values of those who come from backgrounds that differed from their own.

Despite the fact that immigrant students often come from schools much larger or smaller than their new one, there is scant research into the effects of school size on immigrant students. La Sage and Ye (2000) found that for minority students the effects of school size were mixed.

### **III. Classes**

In Anderson's (2002) phenomenological study of immigrant teenagers transitioning into Canadian secondary school students most of the seven student participants discussed how different classes affected them. One of the students mentioned that the classes in home countries are different than ones they go to in Canada. This student suggested that counsellors need to find out about the classes in the place where students have come from in order to better place them in their new classrooms. Several of the students felt that English as a Second Language (ESL) classes were not helpful. One student mentioned that most of the students in his ESL class all spoke his first language, so there was little incentive to speak

English in that class. He felt that the class held him back, whereas in a regular English class he would be forced to learn. Another student in the study suggested that teachers should not presume that they have to teach everything from the beginning just because students do not know it in English.

Padilla and Gonzalez (2001) suggest that there is lack of consideration for the forms of English language instruction immigrant students receive in school and how this affects their school achievement. They point out that there is little information available about the long-term effects of bilingual or ESL instruction on high school academic achievement. Research indicates that students who are determined to complete high school studies are anxious for information about classes and the ways of the school (Watt, Roessingh, & Bosetti, 1996). Sternberg (1990) states that this tacit knowledge is crucial for academic success and students should have relevant information about credits, graduation requirements, and so on as soon as possible. Watt, Roessingh and Bosetti (1996) suggest that it may be useful to have students on hand who speak new immigrant students' first languages and who have been in the system for a period of time to offer explanation and detail in new students' first languages.

There are mixed findings regarding the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students identified as requiring special education assistance other than English as a Second Language programmes. Rice and Ortiz (1994) noted an over-representation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in special education programmes. Lidz (2001) concedes that students from linguistically diverse backgrounds typically score lower than students from the dominant culture on traditional measures and are thus disproportionately identified as handicapped or in need of special services. Linguistically diverse students may also exhibit numerous behaviours associated with learning disabilities, such as single-word or phrase responses, difficulty with sequence and story retelling, and poor recall, comprehension, and vocabulary (Rice and Ortiz, 1994). These behaviours may lead to second language learners being inappropriately diagnosed as learning disabled. Cummins (1991a) notes a marked increase in the number of language minority students classified as learning disabled in the past decade.

Conversely, results of a study by Deponio, Landon, Mullin, and Reid (2000) suggest that there is an under-representation of bilingual dyslexics in special education programmes. Their study suggested that there is a tendency among assessors not to reach a final decision in assessments with linguistically diverse students. Linguistically and culturally diverse

students have also been found to be underrepresented among those determined to be eligible for gifted programmes (Lidz, 2001). Research thus shows that some linguistically diverse students who should be identified with learning difficulties or developmental delays are not, and some who are identified should not be (Gunderson and Siegel, 2001).

## **5. Racism**

There is evidence disputing the popular notion of Canada as a tolerant country supporting the idea of a culturally diverse society. For example, an overview of the 1991 national survey of multicultural and ethnic attitudes in Canada indicated that many groups that are not of European background are less accepted than those of European origin (Berry & Kalin, 1995). This overview also found individual and group variations in attitudes. Some were less accepting of multiculturalism, and less tolerant of diversity and of those who are not of European origin.

In addition to documenting how racism persists in Canadian society, other researchers have more specifically focused on how it is institutionalized in our schools. Codjoe (2001), for example, discusses the issue of systematic racism in Canadian schools as a significant barrier that stands in the way of Black academic achievement. He points to the monocultural content of the school curriculum, including testing and grouping practises, and the expectations of educators for Black and minority children as the major barriers to educational achievement and equality. Hoo Kong (1996) points out that textbooks used in Canadian schools tend to present the perspectives of White, upper-class, Anglo- and French-Canadian males. Alladin (1996) further suggests that textbooks and educational materials also present erroneous information about certain racial groups and omit their contributions. King (1993) points out that the schools' hidden curriculum can cause students to feel marginalized. He states that this is the aspect of schooling through which the subtle and sometimes unintentional forms of racism manifest themselves.

Racism and the devalued position of Blacks in society has been shown to be a primary contributing factor to black underachievement (Fordham, 1988). Alladin (1996) points out that the education provided to Native people in Canada has been traditionally inferior and designed by the dominant society to complement the racist objectives of assimilation, and acculturation of the Native people. Research by Goto (1997) suggests that discrimination and limited opportunities in education are also faced by voluntary minority students in North America.

Thus, research shows that institutionalized racism is present in the Canadian school system and that it can be related to lowered academic achievement in many culturally diverse students. Studies which examine how students respond to racism and discrimination are much fewer in number. There is some evidence that some students may not recognize and/or acknowledge its existence. For example, one student in Fordham's (1988) study was convinced that racism in America was not an institutionalized phenomenon. Jervis (1996) suggests that white teachers' tendencies to overlook or deny racism encourages students to do the same or to keep their feelings inside.

Other studies have shown that students are aware of racism and discrimination. In a two year study conducted in the United States, Phelan, Yu and Davidson (1994) examined the pressures and problems that ethnically diverse students perceive to have an impact on their school and learning endeavors. They found that of those students whose worlds were different and who resisted crossing borders, nearly three quarters felt they were singled out and "picked on" because of their ethnic background or cultural norms and beliefs. In a study of Black youth in Alberta's school system Codjoe (2001) found that all the students in his study said they experienced racism (both subtle and overt) in one form or another. In a very recent study the majority of the sixty-nine students in six Vancouver secondary schools interviewed indicated that racism is an everyday occurrence in their school (Wong & Chang, 2004).

Other studies have found that students not only acknowledge racism and discrimination in their schools, but that they also relate it to academic performance. For example, in a recent ethnographic study low-achieving urban high school students identified racism and discrimination as one of three primary contributors to their underachievement (Lee, 1999). This may not be a surprising finding if interpreted in light of locus of control theory. This suggests that one's perceptions or thoughts have great influence on their actions. Thus, and as both the cultural discontinuity and bicultural developmental theories predict, children who perceive barriers to their success because of their ethnicity may be less engaged in school and less accepting of school as an arena in which they can or should excel (LaFromboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1998).

In addition to experiencing racism, the students in Codjoe's (2001) study also believed that part of the barriers they have to deal with as Black youth is in negative societal labeling and stereotyping of Black people. This finding supports the stereotype threat theory introduced by Steele (1997). This theory attempts to explain the underperformance of

minority students in academic domains. The theory begins with the assumption that to sustain school success one must be identified with school achievement in the sense of its being a part of one's self-definition, a personal identity to which one is self-evaluatively accountable. On the other hand, the experience of feeling discriminated against can, on its own, constrict the development of one's goals and impair academic performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Gougis, 1986). Different groups experience different forms and degrees of stereotype threat because the stereotypes about them differ in content, in scope, and in the situations to which they apply.

In Canada one group which has suffered among the greatest due to stereotyping is First Nation people. Alladin (1996) states that the "Native people themselves have accepted many of the racist stereotypes of themselves and, as a result frequently suffer from low self-esteem and negative feelings about themselves and their culture" (p.37). These feelings cause First Nation students to be less engaged in school and less likely to view school as a place in which they can or should succeed (Alladin, 1996).

Similar findings have been identified in Mexican American students. Okagaki, Frensch, and Dodson (1996) found that children who perceived barriers to their success because of their ethnicity were less engaged in school and were less accepting of school as a place where Mexican American children could or should excel. Perception of racial barriers was also negatively related to children's ratings of self-worth and behavioural competence. Overall, these data suggest that Mexican American children's beliefs about their ethnicity are important to their self-concepts and to their attitudes about school.

Steele (1997) points out that to experience stereotype threat one need not believe the stereotype nor even be worried that it is true of oneself. He maintains that one's daily life can be filled with recurrent situations in which this threat pressures adaptive responses.

For reasons which will be outlined below, people with Iranian backgrounds in Canada may be particularly affected by factors discussed in this section. Before examining the issue of discrimination and Iranian students in Canada, however, it is useful to present background information on the general experiences of this group.

## **C. The Iranian Experience**

### **1. Iranian Immigrants in Canada**

There is scant information about the history of Iranian settlement in any part of Canada (Ebrahimi, 2003). The first recorded Iranian immigrants to Canada were in 1901.

Their numbers fluctuated over the next sixty years, reaching an average of around 100 annual immigrants by 1961 (Statistics Canada). The first major influx of Iranian immigrants came after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Post-revolutionary economic hardship and restrictions on personal freedoms have also encouraged a wave of emigration since the end of the 1980s (Ditmars, 1997).

More specifically to the Vancouver area, it is thought that this is the area where the first Iranian immigrants came (Ebrahimi, 2003). More recently, Vancouver area's Iranian population has tripled in the last five years, with an estimated 30,000 Iranians currently living in the area (Ditmars, 1997). Many recent immigrants point to Vancouver's natural beauty, and in particular the mountainous North Shore's resemblance to Northern Tehran as a deciding factor in their decision to settle in the area.

Hoffman (1988) concedes that Iranians in the United States "remain a hidden, unrecognized, and poorly researched group" (p.164). It is therefore not surprising that there is little information available about the Iranian community on the North Shore of the Vancouver area, where the current study takes place (Ebrahimi, 2003). There is agreement, however, that Iranians in the United States and Canada do not fit the image of the ethnic minority. Hoffman (1988) maintains that cultural groups most often evoke concepts of inequality or disadvantage, but that Iranians within North America are generally highly educated, economically successful professionals of relatively privileged social class. Although the economic position of Iranian immigrants following the revolution is much lower than that of pre-revolution arrivals, Iranians remain overall a relatively successful and well-educated group (Sabagh & Bozorg-Mehr, 1987).

Hoffman (1988) reports that, in general, many Iranians in North America might be classified as unwilling exiles rather than immigrants. Those Iranians who arrived during or after the revolution preserve a strong desire to return to Iran, and they regard life in their new country as temporary. There is a strong attachment to Iran that precludes full identification with American values and life-style.

It has been suggested that the desire to remain somewhat apart from the mainstream extends to keeping a distance from other ethnic groups. Ansari (1974) maintains that there is a recognized sense of cultural superiority among Iranians vis-à-vis non-Iranians. Differences with other culturally diverse groups and possible desires to keep a distance from mainstream and other ethnic groups have kept information on Iranians in Canada scant. Another contributing factor is that Iranians are an extremely heterogeneous population in terms of

religion, ethnicity and politics. Iran is home to many different national and ethnic groups including Fars, Azaris, Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Lors, Turkmens and Baluchis (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2004). Iranians are predominantly Shi'I Muslims, but there are also many different religious minorities including Sunni Moslems, Christians of various denominations, Jews, Zoroastrians and Bahais. The diversity amongst Iranians in Canada makes it difficult to describe them as an ethnic group, which helps to keep them unknown and hidden. Strong family and in-group orientation, an informal and highly flexible political style, as well as a preference for individualistic action have also been cited as reasons for a lack of group cohesion among Iranians (Hoffman, 1988).

## **2. The Children of Iranian Immigrants**

Many first generation Iranian immigrants, or those born outside of Canada (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001), are children. The 1996 census revealed that about twelve per cent were under the age of 10, while twenty-two percent were between the ages of 10 and 24 (Rahnema, 1999). Zadeh (2001) maintains that, "Although the number of Iranian immigrant families in North America is increasing, an extensive review of the literature indicates that no studies have addressed this population in terms of their attitudes toward the education of their children and particularly their attributions about their children's academic achievement" (p.20).

With this assertion, Zadeh (2001) did a comparison study between Iranian mothers in Iran and in Canada in an effort to uncover the changes that may take place in the attribution system of immigrants about children's academic performance as the result of the acculturation process. Zadeh (2001) maintained that if the educational system in Canada is to address successfully the needs of various immigrant groups, it is important to know how people view academic success and failure.

Zadeh (2001) feels that the Iranian population is especially interesting to study as the structure of the educational system in Iran is significantly different from the one in Canada in a number of ways. She summarizes that the educational system in Iran is centralized and top-down and the Ministry of Education determines the policy and textbooks. Students in all grades are examined three times a year on all the school subjects. Teaching religious values is a major part of the educational system. Overall, education brings pride and prestige and educated people are honoured in Iranian society. On the other hand, according to Zadeh (2001), in Canada the educational system is less centralized. Teachers play a more important

role and have more power in terms of the development of course outlines and the curriculum for their own classes than teachers in Iran. Evaluation is based on a combination of class work and research projects, as well as exams.

Zadeh (2001) further points out that in Canada, people have more individual freedom and this is one reason that many choose to live here. She asserts that the differences in the social systems may be the reason why the Iranian-Canadian parents in her study felt that they had less control over their children and their children's behaviour. According to Zadeh, from an immigrant parents' perspective the society is less homogeneous, and their children may be exposed to social forces such as drugs and gangs from which they are shielded in Iran. In Iran parents of teenagers have relatively more power in monitoring what their children do, compared with Iranian-Canadian parents. Conversely, in Canada teenagers are more independent and parents have less power to monitor their children. This is more of a concern for immigrant parents because they are not empowered with parenting strategies appropriate for western culture and at the same time their old strategies may not be as useful anymore and sometimes may even work against them. This was mentioned by a number of parents in the study, some of whom had tried to use their old discipline strategies and to be controlling parents. Most Iranian-Canadian parents felt powerless in terms of their control of societal factors. Iranian Canadian mothers pointed out the challenges faced by an immigrant family and mentioned how difficult it is to be a supportive and stable family in a new society. Issues such as cultural adjustment, language, job, and financial problems were the ones most frequently mentioned.

The Iranian-Canadian parents also felt that students in Canada are given too much personal freedom too early, leading to a lack of encouragement for students to do well in school. They felt that Western society gives the students the message that it is their choice to be educated or not, and that it is acceptable if they choose not to pursue post secondary education.

The other problem mentioned by Iranian-Canadian parents was their inability to help and monitor children with their schoolwork because of cultural and language barriers. The parents also mentioned the differences between the educational system in Iran and in Canada as another barrier to school success.

Zadeh ultimately found there was an effect of culture on the beliefs and attributions of mothers in her study. The definitions of school success and failure of Iranian mothers were product-based, but the definition of immigrant mothers were process-based. Moreover,

mothers' attributions were not limited to the four factors established in Weiner's Theory of Attribution, including ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck (Weiner, 1974; 1980). While Iranian mothers attributed their children's success and failure primarily to "effort", "family" appeared to be the most frequent attribution of both success and failure for Iranian immigrant mothers.

Although not the major focus of Zadeh's (2001) study, she also examined and compared Iranian and Iranian-Canadian students' definitions and attributions of success and failure. She found that Iranian and Iranian-Canadian children differed in their definitions of school success and failure. The majority of Iranian students believed that getting high marks at school was a good indicator of their academic success. Most Iranian-Canadian students, on the other hand, defined school success in terms of academic learning.

Similar to the differences found between Iranian and immigrant mothers, Zadeh (2001) also found differences in the groups of their children. While the main attribution for success for Iranian students was effort, the main attributions for Iranian-Canadian students were interest, effort, and ability. Zadeh (2001) maintains that the differences between the Iranian and Iranian-Canadian students in their attribution of success and failure reflects the impact of Western culture which emphasizes freedom and individual choice. She concludes that the fact that more Iranian-Canadian students emphasize interest is an indication of the integration of this group into western culture. Zadeh maintained that the responses of the Iranian-Canadian students also indicate that they are not a homogeneous group but consist of subgroups in terms of their acculturation strategies. This is consistent with the assertion in the previous section indicating that Iranians in Canada are a very diverse group.

The only other study found involving Iranian students in North America was conducted by Hoffman (1988) at several secondary schools in Los Angeles. Hoffman (1988) identified a consistent pattern of institutional blindness toward Iranians as a group. She found that Iranian holidays were not celebrated in the schools and that little or no attention to Farsi was given during school language days devoted to celebrating linguistic diversity.

Although individual teachers at one school did not personally express any negative attitudes toward Iranians, they assessed the general attitudinal environment of the school toward Iranians as negative. These teachers called Iranians "the most difficult culture" to deal with, and described them as harder to teach and get along with than any other group at the school. Iranians were labeled as 'cheaters', but they were also praised for their ambition

and desire to succeed. The teachers also recognized Iranians as among the most academically successful students in the school.

The study found that Iranians were not accepting or learning American culture at the level demanded of them by the schools. Hoffman (1988) suggested that the implicit educational mission of the schools was for all students to be like Americans. She described primary characteristics of Iranian rejection of this mission as social separatism, covert and overt defiance of expectations, and instrumental orientation toward academic achievement/success. These were combined with symbolic forms of nonacceptance of institutional power as expressed in language and social behaviour.

Teachers suggested that not wanting to become American and being very successful within the system posed a paradox for Iranian students. Hoffman suggests that this disputes the assumption that success in the American system requires at least some inner commitment to that system. Hoffman (1988) explains that the Iranian students were not “acquiring the moral rule of law upon which the school as enculturative agent was based; yet they were learning enough in other domains to become successful within the rules of that system” (p.172). Thus they did not fulfill the American teacher’s expectations of cultural minority behaviour. These expectations included the notion that academic success comes only with acceptance of or assimilation to an American identity, or at least one whose values do not conflict with the fundamental moral basis of the institution.

Hoffman (1988) further asserted that Iranian resistance on a symbolic level to the culture of the school was also expressed in what the teachers considered to be a widespread practise of cheating. Iranians acknowledged that Americans viewed cheating as an immoral act and a symbol of personal corruption. Iranians, however, did not share a similar moral perspective, and many admitted to cheating. For some it was a game of skill and for others an amusing pastime.

Hoffman also found Iranian student rejection of other beliefs held by the majority at one school. For example, English as a Second Language classes were viewed as an impediment rather than an aid to academic progress. Resistance to certain tacit expectations regarding social behaviour within the school was also found. Iranian students consistently seated themselves apart from both American and other ethnic groups in classrooms. Another observation of resistance made by Hoffman (1988) was that “at the conclusion of the lunch period, all students except the Iranians would begin to proceed to the next class; the Iranian

students, however, would remain at their tables until everyone else had left and would only leave after being admonished by an administrator” (p.173).

Hoffman concluded that the cultural conflict model which maintains that cultural differences lead to school failure and maladaptation could not be applied to the Iranians at the school. She maintained that despite such differences, the Iranian students had developed patterns of learning and adjustment that did not lead to typical outcomes. She asserted that because of this, more consideration must be given to the differential impacts of cultural conflict for Americans and Iranians, and the nature of the role of cultural identity in mediating cross-cultural communication difficulties.

Hoffman’s study suggested that a significant difference in Iranian and American communication and behaviour was related to the perceived locus of responsibility for student learning. American teachers saw students as responsible for their own success and failure. The Iranian students, however, perceived teachers as responsible for student learning. They felt that teachers who did not communicate this sense of responsibility were uncaring and negligent in their educational roles. Nearly all the Iranian students in the study indicated that they felt that American teachers “did not care”. The students felt that in order for teachers to show they cared they must present information on an individual and personal level. Hoffman noted that the tendency for American teachers was to use more impersonal communication styles such as writing on the board. The students also felt that teachers did not care because of their perceived lack of tolerance for repeated requests for explanation. For the Iranian students tolerance for repeated explanation was an indication that the teachers cared that the student understand. Hoffman also observed that the Iranian students preferred to receive information from peers, which she suggested was further evidence for the notion that Iranian communication styles emphasize personal over impersonal modes of information transmission.

Hoffman also found a difference in perceptions of questioning the teacher. She found that Iranian students in general questioned the teacher more than any other non-Anglo group. Hoffman (1988) stated that “Some teachers found that this constant questioning was annoying, and it doubtless contributed to the image of Iranians as demanding and aggressive” (p.175). For Iranians the main significance of asking questions was beyond requests for information, which is how questions were primarily regarded by American teachers. For the Iranian students asking questions helped establish and maintain individualized interpersonal communication channels whose maintenance was regarded as an indication of interpersonal

respect. Iranian students felt that American teachers should respond to students' questions in a way that expressed tolerance, patience, and recognition of the value of the question in the context of the student/teacher relationship.

Hoffman (1988) also observed differences in Iranian and American approaches to cognitive tasks. She found that the teachers generally stressed an analytical perspective, while the Iranian students preferred a holistic approach to subject material. Hoffman suggested that this difference in cognitive style was responsible for what some teachers interpreted as a lack of intelligence among Iranian students. Furthermore, the teachers most often asked students to label, define, or manipulate certain elements apart from context, while the Iranian students consistently preferred to write entire sentences or paragraphs, which they would do despite teacher instructions. They felt that this allowed for the more significant meaning of the whole. Hoffman (1988) states that "when it was discovered that students were not following instructions, teachers logically attributed this to some sort of cognitive deficiency, rather than to what were in fact perceived by Iranians as misplaced priorities (p.175).

Hoffman stresses that cultural differences in communication and values did not hinder school learning in the Iranian case. She suggests that therefore the crucial issue may be the type of response to conflict that a group adopts, and the ways cultural identities may be restructured through various cultural learning strategies to overcome the presumed learning impediments of cultural conflict. Americans tended to see conflict and cultural identity as an "either-or" proposition. One either became American or remained Iranian. To Iranians the nature of cultural identity was not a linear, either-or proposition, but an incorporative, integrative one. Iranians felt that their inner values and commitment did not necessarily have to be consistent with social behaviour and action. According to Hoffman (1988), then, one could 'act American' in some situations, whilst remaining fundamentally Iranian in cultural commitment.

Hoffman (1988) concluded that "the major factor in school adjustment among Iranian students was a sort of cultural identity that facilitated acquisition of alternative behavioural, cognitive, and affective frameworks, thereby successfully mediating culturally different meaning systems" (p.176). This process required adaptive flexibility in that both cultural resistance and successful adaptation were required. Hoffman asserted that variations among Iranians in relative academic success were related to the extent to which the individual could

assume an incorporative identity focused upon acquiring selected behaviours and orientations from American culture, while maintaining a firm sense of Iranian identity.

The highly successful Iranians in Hoffman's study thus displayed what she termed "cultural eclecticism". This strategy involved selecting the behaviours thought to represent the best of both cultures and creating a blended social self having characteristics of both cultures. The successful students emphasized their appreciation for some aspects of American culture and their desire to adopt "the good things", while rejecting the bad. At the same time they tended to maintain the good traits of Iranian culture. They tended to be quite flexible in their adaptation, yet to remain firmly Iranian in basic cultural orientation. Hoffman maintained that these Iranians appeared to be well-adjusted, popular, model students. Although they seemed to be learning American culture to the greatest degree, they were in fact learning about the culture rather than becoming American.

Compared to this group of students, those Iranians who fundamentally rejected American culture while becoming superficially acculturated were moderately successful, and those who felt spiritually isolated experienced the most difficulty in their personal encounters with faculty and administration at the school as well as in achieving high levels of academic performance.

Thus, in Hoffman's (1988) study, the type of adaptive response most conducive to success in the school appeared to be eclecticism. This type of cultural identity allows for situational adaptive flexibility and incorporative cross-cultural learning, without, however, allowing cultural conflict to threaten cultural self-definition. This lends support to bicultural developmental or negotiation theory on academic achievement.

### **3. Iranians and Racism and Discrimination**

Karim and Khorrami (1999) maintain that there is a tremendous anti-Iranian feeling in North America. They state that "Many Iranian Americans have often felt concerned, ambivalent, and at times even ashamed about revealing their heritage in an atmosphere steeped with media images portraying Iranians as hostile, fanatical, and above all as terrorists during the period of the revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, and as recently as the 1991 conflict known as the Persian Gulf War" (Karim & Khorrami, 1999, p. 21). They explain that during the latter event Iranians were lumped together with Arabs as the enemy of the west.

Ahmad (2001) points to two events which brought Muslims, including many Iranians, into the media in a disparaging way. These events were the publication of the controversial

book, The Satanic Verses in the late 1980s and the Gulf War in the early 1990s. Ahmad (2001) maintains that these events caused an “Islamic-re-assertion”, and that most non-Muslims found this passion and zeal which Muslims in the west espoused towards their religion to be perplexing and even threatening.

The events of September 11, 2001 have escalated the negative feelings towards Arabs, Iranians and Muslims. After this event the National Association of School Psychologists (2002) put out an alert entitled “Safe Schools and Springtime Stress, Post 9-11: Prevention Issues”. It stated that as a result of the attack, students would be facing added future stresses including the continuing war on terrorism and increasing racial and religious tensions especially directed toward Arab-Americans and members of the Islamic faith. One of the Vancouver immigrant students interviewed in Anderson’s (2002) study spoke of the embarrassment she felt by people staring at her mother after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack. She said that she wished people would ask questions so they would learn more and not continue to make mistakes about her religion. She felt that it was particularly important for teachers to know that all Muslims are not the same.

The fear or intolerance of Muslims based on their religion has been termed “Islamophobia” (Gillborn, 1997; Michie, 2002). Ahmad (2001) notes that the media has picked up on the popularity of this phenomenon in its representations of Iranians – Middle Easterners in general – as terrorists and religious fundamentalists. This phenomenon has caused much concern among Canadian Muslims. For example, the Canadian Islamic Congress (2003) recently urged Canada’s 600,000 Muslims to take precautions including memorizing the name and phone number of their lawyer, not answering questions without a lawyer present, displaying Canadian flags on their luggage, leaving any documentation referring to their birthplace at home and carrying only their Canadian documentation.

There is another negative image of Muslims portrayed by the media, this one aimed at females. As pointed out by Said (1981), “the ‘excesses’ of the Islamic regime towards women continues to make headlines and the subject of Muslim women and religious revivalism in the Muslim world continue to be matters of wide interest. Hoodfar (1993) agrees in her statement: “Whenever unfolding events confirm western stereotypes about Muslim women, researchers and journalists rush to spread the news of Muslim women’s oppression” (p.12). Hoodfar (1993) further suggests that colonial images of passive Muslim women extend from the media into the social service sector and into scholarship. She states that teachers frequently assume those from Muslim communities to be excessively

authoritarian and to hold narrow, restrictive expectations for their children. They are thought to be raised in families dominated by the rule of the father. Such views can lead teachers to lower their expectations for these women, because they expect their lives to be restricted by overly protective families, the specter of early marriage, and the demands of home. On the other hand, it could also possibly motivate some teachers to help them all the more.

Ahmad's (2001) study of British women and academic achievement points to the fallacies in the above beliefs. She found that higher education was *not* viewed by the women or their families as being incongruous to the 'Muslim way of being'. In fact, most women in this research reported that their parents viewed higher education and careers as an absolute necessity.

#### **D. Conclusion to the Literature Review**

This literature review has revealed the complexity of the relationship between academic achievement and ethnicity. The theoretical approaches presented indicate a shift in thinking as this relationship is better understood. It is implausible, however, that any one approach could take into account all the variables associated with this relationship. Thus while the approaches discussed may be useful in allowing for a greater understanding of the academic achievement of culturally diverse students, equally valuable is an openness to examine other variables which may affect this phenomenon. Furthermore, as the newer theory suggests, this relationship is dynamic and evolving, adding to its complexity. The theoretical approaches and other variables also need to be examined to determine if and how they apply to or influence particular groups of culturally diverse students. In order to better make this determination it is beneficial to have an understanding of the group in consideration. Thus a brief history of Iranian settlement in Canada and a review of background, characteristics, and experiences of Iranians in Canada was provided.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH DESIGN/METHODOLOGY

#### A. Interpretive Research

Examining student thoughts, perceptions and experiences allows for a student-centered view of academic achievement (Martinez, Scott, Cranston-Gingras & Platt, 1994), which is a goal of this study. The focus of interpretive research is on understanding the realities of the study participants, the meaning they assign to objects, and their notions of what is meaningful (Shafif & Stebbins, 1991). The design of an interpretive research study is often emergent and flexible, sample selection is usually nonrandom, purposeful and small, and the interpretive investigator spends a substantial amount of time in the natural setting of the study with intense contact with participants (Merriam, 1998). These characteristics of interpretive research fit closely with the primary objective of the study, which is to determine what a number of students with Iranian backgrounds in an affluent neighborhood secondary school in Canada identify as most important to the academic successes and difficulties of themselves and other students with Iranian backgrounds.

The views of interpretive researchers also correspond to the views of the researcher who conducted this study. For example, Blumer (1969) suggests that unless we ask people about the meanings they are giving to things we will invent their meanings and we may do so inaccurately. Like Blumer (1969) and Becker (1996), the writer feels that rather than speculating or inventing, it is best to ask people directly about their thoughts and feelings, which is what is done in this study.

The researcher also believes that human feeling and perceptions must be taken into account for any science of human behaviour to be meaningful and complete (Palys, 1997). The researcher agrees with Thomas (1928), who wrote that “perceptions are real because they are real in their consequences” (p.16). As a school psychologist the researcher has observed that students’ perceptions and attitudes are linked to their behaviours and academic performance, as a number of studies have shown (Ford, 1993; Artiles, Aguirre-Munoz & Abedi, 1998; Hebert & Reis, 1999). Like Sadowski (2002), she believes that understanding minority students’ perceptions about school may be at least as important as monitoring their test scores. As a school psychologist, the closer she can get to her students’ beliefs,

experiences, and feelings, the closer she feels she understands them. This intimacy is a goal of interpretive research and was essential to meet the objectives of the study.

## **B. Research Design**

With the suitability of the interpretive research paradigm for the study established, the type of interpretive research design which best suited the research study objectives was then determined. Although each type of design can be distinguished by specific functions and objectives, each of them share common characteristics and often work in conjunction with one another (Creswell, 1994; Merriam, 1998). The four primary types of interpretive studies are ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenological studies and case studies (Creswell, 1994; Merriam, 1998). They are described below and it is shown that the study conducted, while primarily ethnographic, contains elements of each.

### **1. Ethnography**

Ethnography was first employed by anthropologists to study human society and culture (Cole, 1996). Ethnographies are those studies in which the researcher examines an intact cultural group in their natural setting over a prolonged period of time. The research process develops contextually and evolves in response to lived realities encountered in the field setting (Creswell, 1994).

This study is primarily an ethnographic study, as culture is an important construct and because the researcher presents the students contextually within their school. The study provides rich context bound information describing the students' perspectives. Metz (2000) contends that making a concerted effort to understand participants' perspectives is one of the basic elements of ethnography.

Becker (1996) suggests that fieldworkers should best aim for "breadth", referring to "trying to find out something about every topic the research touches on, even tangentially" (p.9). The number of methods used for data collection, and the inclusion of data from parent and teacher participants ensures the breadth of this study which in turn helps provide it with trustworthiness.

Another way that the researcher provides the study with trustworthiness is by including the words of the participants as much as possible. According to Spradley (1979), investigating the participants' experiences as expressed in their own words in order to

understand their way of life is the goal of ethnography. The findings of this study are primarily presented in the words of the participants.

Observation is also a primary method of data collection in ethnography (Creswell, 1994), and the participants were observed in their school over a period of approximately six months. Metz (2000) contends that ethnographers “participate with the people they study on a prolonged basis, collecting multiple kinds of data from multiple sources and triangulating them” (p.64). The data collected by multiple methods in this study was compared and contrasted and triangulated in a systematic way, as described below.

The aims and objectives of ethnographic research closely match those of this study. Furthermore, other researchers have found ethnography to be a useful way of studying the academic achievement of culturally diverse students (Ford, 1993). Such studies have been conducted in two primary ways, depending upon the theoretical stance assumed by the particular researcher.

One type of these studies uses the micro-ethnographic approach. Most micro-ethnographers adhere to the cultural incompatibilities theory as described in the previous chapter. Typically in micro-ethnographic research students from minority cultures are studied in their classroom settings and their interactions and educational processes are compared to those from the majority culture (Ogbu, 1987). Micro-ethnographic studies have included those focusing on African-American students (Erickson & Schultz, 1982; Heath, 1983), Hawaiian students (Au & Jordon, 1981), Native American students (Phillips, 1983), and Mexican-American students (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986; Moll & Diaz, 1987).

Conversely, those taking the macro-ethnographic approach generally have examined their research problem from the cultural discontinuity theoretical stance. Macro-ethnographers believe that important differences in academic achievement among various groups of minorities arise from specific minority communities’ experiences in the after-school opportunity structure. Ogbu (1974), for example, contends that good ethnographic research must be based on an understanding of the historical, political, economic, and social context of a group of persons under study.

The literature review indicated that there is no simple explanation for student achievement or failure, and that a more comprehensive view is needed. It is thus logical that studies which attempt to combine elements of both micro- and macroethnography may be superior to those based on one theoretical stance. Gillborn (1997) suggests that by its very

nature “ethnography demonstrates the need to connect analyses at both the macro- and micro-levels” (p.388). Trueba (1988) and Spindler & Spindler (1987) contend that the strength of ethnographic research and its contribution to theory building depends on the strength of each of the microanalytical links of the inferential chains that form our macrotheoretical statements.

Thus, this study includes elements of both micro- and macro- ethnography. A group of students with Iranian backgrounds are closely examined in their school setting and the findings and analyses are presented contextually. It describes the perspectives of the student participants as well as identifies factors which may shape wider patterns of success and failure.

## **2. Grounded Theory Studies**

In grounded theory methodology the researcher derives a theory through the use of multiple stages of data collection and the refinement and the interrelationship of categories of information (Creswell, 1994). The theory emerges from the research in an inductive, exploratory mode (Palys, 1997).

This study used an exploratory, inductive approach, and themes emerged from the participants themselves. This provided information with implications for existing theoretical approaches and useful for the later development of new theory. While this may not be considered grounded theory in the theory generating sense as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), it is in line with the grounded modifying of theory as initially described by Merton (1948).

## **3. Case Studies**

Case studies are those in which the researcher explores a single phenomenon or entity and collects detailed information through a variety of data collection procedures and during a sustained period of time (Creswell, 1994). A case study is often explained to be a bounded system (Smith, 1978), or within a bounded context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Stake (1995) describes a case as an “integrated system”. Because context is an important aspect of this study many of the findings are presented and analyzed within the context of the characteristics of the individual student participants.

#### **4. Phenomenological Studies**

Phenomenological studies are those in which the researcher examines human experiences through the detailed descriptions of the people being studied (Creswell, 1994). The method of research is understanding the “lived experience”. These studies involve investigating a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged encounters to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Creswell, 1994). This study was thus also guided by phenomenology, as the underlying purpose was to gain the students’ perspectives. Eight students were examined in depth using a variety of methods including interviews, and much of the data collected was the words of the student participants.

### **C. Validity and Reliability**

Throughout the design of the current study issues of validity and reliability were considered. While some of the ways in which the researcher attempted to increase the validity and reliability of the current study have been described briefly above, a more explicit description provides readers with the ability to more accurately determine the attention given to these aspects.

#### **1. Internal Validity**

Congruent with the assumptions underlying interpretive research, issues of validity and reliability are often discussed as issues of “trustworthiness”. Issues of trustworthiness primarily address whether the researcher has gained full access to the knowledge and meanings of informants (Palys, 1997). The problem concerns the difficulty of gaining an accurate or true impression of the phenomenon under study (Shaffif & Stebbins, 1991). Trustworthiness includes the internal validity of a study as it deals with the question of how research findings match reality (Merriam, 1998).

LeCompte, Preissle and Tesch (1993) suggest that there are four factors that help ensure the internal validity of ethnographic research:

First, the ethnographer’s common practice of living among participants and collecting data for long periods provides opportunities for continual data analysis and comparison to refine constructs; it ensures a match between researcher categories and participant realities. Second, informant interviews, a major ethnographic data source, are phrased in the empirical categories of participants; they are less abstract than many instruments used in other research designs. Third, participant observation, the ethnographer’s

second key source of data – is conducted in natural settings reflecting the life experiences of participants more accurately than do more contrived or laboratory settings. Finally, ethnographic analysis incorporates researcher reflection, introspection, and self-monitoring that Erickson (1973) calls disciplined subjectivity, and these expose all phases of the research to continual questioning and reevaluation (p. 342).

Thus, the ethnographic research design of the current study ensures internal validity in these regards.

The internal validity of the current research study is also enhanced by the use of triangulation strategies. Triangulation is the use of multiple data-collection methods, sources, analysts or theories. Denzin (1994) maintains that sound interpretation of the real world must rely upon triangulation strategies and that the use of these strategies “will broaden, thicken, and deepen the interpretive base of any study” (p.6465). The specific triangulation strategies employed in the current study are described in detail in following sections.

Another way to ensure internal validity in a research study is to include the researcher’s assumptions, worldview, and theoretical orientation. While some of these have been presented at the beginning of this chapter, other researcher biases are also revealed in following sections.

Merriam and Simpson (1995) suggest that another way of enhancing a study’s internal validity is by using a participatory or collaborative mode of research. Efforts were made to ensure the involvement of the study participants as much as possible throughout the various phases of the current research. As she consulted with them, the researcher referred to the student, parent, and teacher participants as co-researchers in the study.

## **2. Reliability**

Reliability in the traditional sense refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated (Yin, 1994). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that this notion does not fit when applied to qualitative research. They concede that it is better to speak of the “dependability” or “consistency” of the results obtained from qualitative data. The question is not whether findings will be found again but “whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (Merriam, 1998). Care was taken in the current study to show that, given the data collected, the results make sense.

LeCompte, Preissle, and Tesch (1993) state that researchers can ensure that results are dependable by clearly stating their position. Consistent with their suggestions for doing so, the researcher has explained the assumptions and theory behind the study, her position in regards to the student participants, the basis for selecting them, a description of them, and the social context from which data were collected.

Merriam (1998) suggests another way to ensure the results of a study are dependable is through the use of triangulation. Using multiple methods of data collection and analysis, as it will be shown was done in this study, strengthens not just internal validity, but reliability as well.

Guba and Lincoln (1981) suggest that audiences can authenticate the findings of a study by following the trail of the researcher. Dey (1993) concedes that in order for an “audit” to take place, the researcher must describe in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the study. In regards to the current study, this is done in the following sections.

### **3. External Validity**

External validity is concerned with the extent to which findings of one study can be applied to other situations. As will be described below, the researcher did not intend to present “the Iranian schooling experience in Canada” as an isolated and hypothetical phenomenon, but instead to look at individual cases of the many experiences within this broader context. The student participants were not so much presented as a sample, but more as specific examples of Canadian students with Iranian backgrounds.

As determined in the “Data Analysis” section below, many of the issues that the student participants brought up were similar. Rich, thick description of the research situation is provided so that others may be able to determine how closely their situations match it. Called reader or user generalizability, the degree of transferability of findings is up to people in other situations to determine themselves (Walker, 1980; Firestone, 1993). The findings may be considered more transferable to other young people with Iranian background at schools with similar contexts. The researcher notes below several factors which make the students participating in the current study a relatively unique group and which may therefore lessen reader generalizability.

As well as identifying similar views amongst the student participants, the researcher took care to identify issues on which they held diverse or contradictory views, and these

findings are also presented. The purpose of this is to avoid stereotypes from emerging. By presenting these views in context where possible, this also allows for reader or user generalizability to take place.

#### **D. Research Setting and Participant Selection**

The area where the students in the present study are from is one of the most desirable residential communities in all of Canada. The municipality has been identified as the richest in Canada (North Shore News, 2002). The area has also been identified as one of the best-educated. Eighty-two per cent of adult residents have achieved high school graduation, compared to seventy per cent within the province of British Columbia. One-third of the adults in the city have at least one university degree. (West Vancouver School District, 2002)

As determined in the literature review, little information is available about the Iranian community within the city where the study takes place. An extensive search determined that there is no written history of settlement of Iranians in any part of Canada. This finding is confirmed by Ebrahimi (2003), who suggests that the first immigrants from Iran were independently wealthy and settled in the area where the study takes place. Statistics indicate that those living within this community primarily speak English as a first language (seventy-five percent). Seven percent speak Chinese as a first language. Five percent of residents speak Farsi, the language of Iranian people, as a first language (Statistics Canada, 2001).

The School District Information Guide for the 2002-2003 school year indicates that the city believes in the value of education and has high expectations for its children and the quality of service received. Indeed the schools within the district consistently rank in the top percentile of all schools in British Columbia for academic, athletic and artistic achievement (North Shore News, 2002). The latest Foundation Skills Assessment results indicate that the school district achieved in the highest level of performance in the province in reading, writing, and numeracy skills (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002).

The school in which the study took place is located in the community and school district described above. No information was readily available on the Iranian student population within this school. In order to get an estimate of the number of this population, the researcher determined how many students were registered in English as a Second Language (ESL) that had Farsi listed as their first language. There were sixty-nine in the fall of 2002. It was recognized that this would be a minimal indicator of actual numbers of

students with Iranian background, as many would not be registered in ESL. An Iranian community group had estimated that there were approximately ninety to one hundred Persian families with at least one child enrolled at the school. This would place the percentage of students with Iranian background at the school at approximately ten percent. Similarly, no data was available on the number of teaching staff with Iranian background at the school. Through her observations and discussions with the teachers, the researcher was able to identify two of the 54 members listed in the staff directory with such background.

The sample for the study included students with Iranian backgrounds attending the high school within the community and school district described above. The researcher works as a School Psychologist within this district, and the school was on her caseload during the school year that the data was collected. She worked with ten students within the school that year. While this gives her minimal visibility to the majority of students and staff at the school, it is recognized that her role within the school places limitations on the data collected and on the study findings. These limitations are acknowledged where appropriate in other sections, and the ways in which the researcher tried to minimize their effects are also supplied.

The researcher's initial request to have a random sample was denied by the administration of the school district. The researcher was informed that district permission for the study within the selected school would only be granted if prospective participant parents choose to respond to a public invitation.

With this restriction the researcher placed an invitation in the local school newsletter for those parents with Iranian backgrounds who may be interested in having their children participate in a study of their schooling experiences to attend one of two meeting dates. This invitation was included in both English and Farsi.

Initially twelve parents indicated that they would be interested in having their son or daughter participate in the study and that they themselves would also like to take part in the study. One of the students indicated that he did not want to participate. The eleven remaining students met criteria as suitable participants in that they were available and willing to participate in the study. Using a self selected sample can be problematic in studies where generalizations about a particular population are to be made. As stated earlier, however, the purpose of this study is not to understand "the Iranian Canadian schooling experience" as an isolated and hypothetical phenomenon, but instead to look at individual cases of the many experiences within this broader context. The student participants are suggested to be more "examples" of Canadian students with Iranian backgrounds than they are a "sample".

The student participants could all be classified as first generation immigrants in that none were born in Canada. All of the parents of these students were born in Iran. Inclusion of these students also created a fairly equal number of males and females and a wide range of grade level, which was necessary to ensure a wide range of the participant experience.

Two of the participants moved to the United States near the beginning of the school year. One of the participants went to Iran in April and never returned to the school despite giving no prior indication of such plans to the researcher or to school administration and never having formally withdrawn.

Of the remaining eight students in the study two were born in the United States, one in Dubai, and the others in Iran. They had been in Canada from a range of six months to twelve years. Half of the students were landed immigrants, half were Canadian citizens. Five were male and three were female. There was one student from grades 8, 9, 11 and 12, and four from grade 10.

As the study was progressing student participants introduced the researcher to their friends who had found out about the study and wanted to participate. Similarly the parent participants often brought friends to the focus group meetings and several of these parents indicated that they desired their child to be in the study. The researcher unfortunately had to turn down these requests in order to keep the study to a manageable size and to stay within her time schedule.

Because of the difficulties involved with pre-determined definitions of what constitutes a “successful” from a “non-successful” or “low-achieving” student, no attempts were made to have an equal representation of both types of students. However, Nieto (2000) has observed it is logical to assume that “students who are successful in school are more likely to want to talk about their experiences than those who are not” (p.11). A later analysis of the students’ grades reinforced this assumption that the student participants could all be considered successful in that there was only one failing mark by one student in one subject during the course of the school year. Furthermore, the students had all thought about the future and had high expectations. The inclusion of successful students in the study may be helpful in challenging commonly held stereotypes, as the majority of research on culturally diverse students includes exclusively low achieving students.

## **E. Ethics**

As this study involved human participants all required ethics procedures were completed at the university, school district and school levels prior to beginning the collection of data. Clearly written descriptions outlining the purpose and nature of the study were prepared for both students and their parents. Permission forms were signed by both parents and the students. Martin (1975) notes that, although the consent of minors has no legal standing, it seems to have a valuable therapeutic basis. By demonstrating value for their perceptions, the researcher allowed the student participants ownership and opportunity to guide their educational destinies (Aaroe & Nelson, 1998). Research rules governing confidentiality, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time were fully explained and strictly followed. The researcher follows the ethical standards laid out by the American Psychological Association (1992) in her daily work as a school psychologist, and this aided her in all ethical regards.

Oakley (1999) notes that “because of features of the qualitative paradigm, researchers who use these methods are in a position of more power over the researched” (p. 164). Stacey (1988) concedes that because of the importance of the relationship between the ethnographer and her/his subjects, there is the risk of manipulation and betrayal. The researcher tried to minimize such negative effects by giving the participants choices, encouraging them to be involved in the research process as much as possible, and by treating them as co-researchers. The students were asked where they would prefer the interviews and all chose to be interviewed at the school. Appointment times were set up at their convenience. Prior permission was obtained to tape-record the interviews. Summaries of initial transcripts of the first interview were shared with the students and they were allowed to edit and add what they wished.

Similar procedures were undertaken with the parents. As will be seen below the researcher changed her initial plan to use focus groups with the students because of what the parents had to say about this method of investigation. The parents also made it clear that they wished to hold their own focus group meetings on a monthly basis, not just twice as the researcher had initially planned. Several times a parent indicated they had more to share that they were not comfortable saying in front of the group, and private interview times were set up to accommodate these requests. It was continually made clear to the parents that their knowledge or preferred procedural changes would always be valued.

Near the beginning of the school year the teachers, counsellors, and administrators at the school were informed of the study in writing. They were invited to a focus group meeting and encouraged to contact the researcher by phone or e-mail if they wished to meet privately. A similar procedure was followed near the end of the school year.

## **F. Methods of Investigation**

Issues of ethics and trustworthiness were kept at the forefront of the researcher's mind when choosing and carrying out data collection procedures. Below is an examination of the data collection procedures used, including brief explanations as to why these procedures were chosen and how the more common criticisms and pitfalls of them were addressed.

### **1. Semi-Structured Interviews**

Palys (1997) suggests that interviews provide a technique where people can tell their thoughts, instead of having someone guessing at them, and where they can explain themselves, instead of having someone speculate about what their motives might be. These uses directly correspond to the goal of the present study, that being to provide a student-centered view of academic achievement.

The greatest challenge faced by those who use interviews is to gather not just data, but meaningful data (Palys, 1997). Gathering meaningful data from interviews can be achieved in a number of different ways. One way is by choosing the correct type of interview for a particular study. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer freedom to modify a pre-set of questions (Merriam, 1998). Based upon the researcher's perception of what seems most appropriate in the context of the interview, the researcher can change the way the questions are worded, give explanations, leave out particular questions which seem inappropriate, or include additional ones (Robson, 1993). Semi-structured interviews thus allow for in-depth and personalized information gathering (Aaroe & Nelson, 1998). They can be targeted to focus on the study topic and they can provide rich, thick, insightful data necessary to ethnographic studies (Tellis, 1997). They therefore were the most appropriate for use in this study.

The development of focus questions, as well as interview techniques and interviewer skills are also crucial to the collection of meaningful data (Drever, 1995). A previous assignment by the writer (Trembley, 2002b) identified many critical aspects in these considerations, which were applied to the present study where appropriate. Most importantly

the researcher completed a research project using semi-structured interviews in order to gain experience with their usage for the present study (Trembley, 2001). She also tried out the focus questions with culturally diverse students in the school where the study took place in order to identify and discard poor questions (Johnson, 1994) and to gain experience with the method. A description of the contents of the student interviews which was supplied to the administration in the school district in which the study took place is included in Appendix A, and an illustrative example of an interview transcript is included in Appendix B.

Each of the eight student participants was interviewed for a period of approximately 45 minutes. Two of the students required additional interview times as they had more to say. In order to add trustworthiness to the interviews the researcher met with each of the participants again and allowed them to react to a summary of their interview(s), and encouraged them to edit and add as they saw fit. They were also presented with an initial analysis of the findings and asked to provide their feedback to this information.

## **2. Focus Groups**

Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956) first used the term “focus group” to apply to a situation in which the interviewer asks group members very specific questions about a topic after considerable research has already been completed. Since then various definitions of a focus group have emerged (Wilson, 1997).

While some researchers fail to distinguish focus groups from group interviews, Wilson (1997) points out an important distinction, that being that group interviews “do not explicitly include participant interaction as an integral part of the research process” (p. 211). In addition to the utilization of group interactions, there are a number of other common characteristics of a focus group. They generally include a small group of four to twelve people who meet with a trained researcher, facilitator, or moderator (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). This meeting is usually one to two hours in length and a selected topic is discussed (Morgan, 1993). A non-threatening environment is encouraged. Focus groups are mainly used to explore participants’ perceptions, attitudes, feelings, ideas (Morgan & Spanish, 1984).

Wilson (1997) points out that focus groups provide a useful addition to other qualitative research methods and can help provide a study with triangulation. Morgan and Spanish (1984) concur, stating, “Focus groups not only give us access to certain kinds of qualitative

phenomena that are poorly studied with other methods, but also represent an important tool for breaking down narrow methodological barriers” (p. 254).

In addition to providing individual responses, focus groups have the advantages of being inexpensive, data rich, and flexible. They help stimulate study participants, help them to recall experiences, and can provide cumulative and elaborative data (Fontana & Frey, 1994). It was initially thought that these advantages of focus groups would make them particularly suitable for gathering student, parent and teacher data for this study. However, at the initial meeting with interested parents they expressed great concern about the use of this method with their children. The parents were unanimous in their feelings that their children would not want to participate in the study if a focus group method were to be employed, and that the researcher would not be able to get them to open up in front of others. Despite the researcher attempting to go over how these concerns would be dealt with, the parents insisted individual interviews would be preferable. Because this was obviously a sensitive issue with the parents, and because the data could be gathered in the way they preferred, the decision was made to undertake focus groups with the parents and educators only.

Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956) point out that the group does present some special problems. First is that the researcher must keep one person or a small coalition of persons from dominating the group. As Wilson (1997) concedes, this dominance is likely to interfere with individual expression. Second, the researcher must be able to encourage reluctant or restraining or hostile respondents to participate. Third, the researcher must obtain responses from the entire group to ensure the fullest possible coverage of the topic. The researcher in the current study was aware of these problems and worked hard to minimize them in the focus groups held. The researcher also encouraged the focus group participants to contact her privately at any time in a number of ways, including telephone, e-mail, or in-person if they had any concerns they wished to discuss privately.

The researcher employing focus groups also needs to have an understanding of group dynamics management and must be able to balance the directive interviewer role with the role of moderator. The researcher’s teaching, counselling, and testing experiences have allowed her to develop these skills. Furthermore, a pilot focus group including students from an International School with the topic being their academic successes and failures was undertaken in order to gain experience with the method.

The purpose of the parent focus groups were to help determine the match between their reported perceptions and those of their children. A general idea of the degree to which the

parents share their children's perceptions of what has contributed to their academic successes and failures allows for a more accurate and complete analysis to take place. The first two parent focus groups were centered around variables which they felt were of greatest impact on the questions of the study. During the four remaining focus groups the researcher presented student findings and asked their assistance in interpreting this data and in connecting it with their own thoughts and feelings.

Similarly the focus groups for the teachers, counselors, and administrators were used primarily to determine the match between their perceptions and those of the student participants to aid in a more accurate and complete analysis. At the initial educator focus group the participants were asked to share what variables they felt were most important to the question of the study and at the second one they were asked to respond to the student's perceptions.

### **3. Observation-Based Research**

Participant or direct observation occurs when the researcher makes a site visit to gather data (Tellis, 1997). The researcher observed each of the student participants in at least one seventy seven minute class; several of the participants were observed during two or three classes. These observations were made during the six month data collection phase of the study. Most occurred around the same time or after the interviews with the students had taken place. The researcher also made frequent informal observations of the participants and other students with Iranian background in the school hallways and before and after classes and during breaks during the data collection phase. Field observations were guided by the general questions of the study in order to provide comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information (Center for Educational Research and Innovation, 2001). From her extensive literature review the researcher was aware of variables which have been related to the academic achievement of culturally diverse students, included those listed in APPENDIX A. Whenever possible the researcher made note in her observation journal of any of these variables which might be affecting the academic achievement of the student participants and other students with Iranian backgrounds. For example, in each class she observed the researcher recorded the number of students with Iranian backgrounds and compared this with the number of other students in the class. Similarly, she made note of where the students sat in the class and whom they interacted with. Other examples of data which was more unique

to a particular class included a description of a teaching technique which was thought to be impacting student behavior and/or performance.

Lofland (1971) points out that in-depth, ethnographic interview and participant observation go particularly well together. Observations can be used as necessary to understand a point which may arise from an interview, or vice versa. Using these methods in conjunction allows for data triangulation, which increases the trustworthiness of the study (Yin, 1993, 1994; Robson, 1993). Participant observation also allows the researcher to cover events in real time and in real context (Tellis, 1997). These advantages to observation-based research methodologies indicated that it was a suitable method of data collection for the purposes of this ethnographic study.

Observation-based research does, however, present problems of both internal and external validity (Cohen & Manion, 1994). The possibility that an observer's judgment will be affected by their close involvement leads to concerns about internal validity. In observation-based research researchers are prone to selectivity, they can miss facts, and their presence might cause unnatural change to occur (Tellis, 1997). The researcher's role as a school psychologist has provided her with experience in discouraging negative influences during student observations. The use of observation in the present study was used primarily to help clarify data gathered from the participant interviews.

#### **4. Document-Based Research**

Document-based research was used in this study to gather and to corroborate demographic information. This information was obtained from records and publications at both the district and school levels. Documents were also used to help describe the community and school systems which participants have experienced and which helped them to form the opinions they hold.

Document-based research also includes field notes. These are accounts in writing which the researcher makes after returning from each observation, interview or other research session (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). They may include "what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.107). Hebert and Reis (1999) included field notes in the data in their ethnographic study of what factors high-achieving culturally diverse students perceive as enabling them to succeed. The researcher used her field notes in a similar manner in the current study.

One of the advantages of using document-based research involves reliability. Robson (1993) concedes that ‘the data are in permanent form and hence can be subject to re-analysis, allowing reliability checks and replication studies’ (p.243). Other advantages of the document-based research methodology include lack of obtrusion, exactness, and the general coverage of an extended time span (Tellis, 1997).

The validity of documents needs to be carefully reviewed so as to avoid incorrect data being included in the database (Tellis, 1997). The researcher ensured that she did not treat the data from documents as unmitigated truth, and substantiated it whenever possible. The potential for over-reliance on documents as evidence has also been criticized (Tellis, 1997). Documents were used as an addition to other data collection procedures in the present study. Other criticisms involve the potential for biases, including data selectivity and reporting bias (Johnson, 1994). The researcher tried to remain as neutral as possible in these considerations. Furthermore, documents may be difficult to retrieve or access might be blocked (Johnson, 1994). The researcher took care to gain access to documents in a way pre-approved with their keepers.

## **G. Data Analysis**

As described above, the researcher used a variety of data – focus groups, interviews, documents, and observations – to ensure the accuracy of her analysis. Checking data across a variety of methods is referred to as methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1994). An increasing number of researchers are using this type of triangulation to achieve broader and better results (Fontana and Frey, 1994). The use of this type of triangulation increases the internal validity and the reliability of the current study.

According to Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen (1993), “The analysis of qualitative data is best described as a progression, not a stage; an ongoing process, not a one-time event.” (p.111). The researcher obtained a considerable amount of fact and information from the students that prompted further investigation.

Collecting data from the student participants’ parents and teachers was also part of the progression in the current study. This data was used to clarify data gathered from the students and to determine whether the parents and teachers shared the same perspectives. This procedure provides the study with data source triangulation. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) refer to this type of triangulation as a method of “checking inferences drawn from one set of data sources by collecting data from others”. Data source triangulation allows for the

comparison of different sources of evidence in order to determine the accuracy of information (Denzin,1994). Knowing how the students' perceptions of academic achievement match the views of those around them enhances the trustworthiness of the study.

More specific processes were also completed. Case study files on each of the student participants were created. Included in these files were the student's records, interview transcripts, notes on the student's edits and additions to the presented summary of the interview, observations, field notes which pertained to a particular student, and any of the data gathered from a parent which was specific to the student.

Yin (1993) states that "the major rationale for using this method is when your investigation must cover both a particular *phenomenon* and the *context* within which the phenomenon is occurring" (p. 31). Yin (1993) provides an example of a case study in education which is particularly relevant to the current research study. He describes how student performance could be a phenomenon in the context of the student's peer environment, family interactions, and prior experience with schooling.

As Yin (1993) suggests, case studies can introduce an innumerable number of variables into the study. By organizing the data according to each student as a case the researcher was not, however, attempting to determine any causal or associative relationships. This was done primarily as a means of organization and of recognizing that context is extremely important, and to add richness to other data when appropriate.

A more specific process, emergent theme analysis (Spradley, 1979), followed each interview. Through this form of analysis, the researcher was able to determine major themes and issues which emerged from the interviews. Additionally, this process assisted in determining the presence or lack of a connection within and among interviews. While the actual interview and its transcription allowed the researcher to become very familiar with the contents, emergent theme analysis added reflection and synthesis to the process.

The transcripts of each interview was read first to review the contents. Then it was read and examined more closely with comments added in the margins. In the third reading, those comments were viewed for major themes (Wolcott, 1990). The themes were then colour coded throughout the interview (Martin, 1992; Seidman, 1991). The colours were then clustered and matrices were designed (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This allowed the researcher to refer back to the matrices for quotes and points of emphasis as she reported her findings. The coding process served as an indicator of consistencies and discrepancies in the perceptions of the students.

The first two parent focus groups were transcribed. A similar procedure to that described above was carried out during the first two meetings, and what the parents thought were important determinants were compared with those identified by the students. The following four meetings were tape recorded and the researcher listened to each tape a number of times while taking notes. These meetings focused on the parents' responses to the themes that the students themselves had identified as important and were used to confirm or question student perceptions.

The first educator focus group was not recorded as the vast majority of the participants indicated they were not comfortable with the procedure. Notes from this group were thus taken and examined to determine what they felt were the most important determinants of student success and failure among immigrant students with Iranian backgrounds. At the second focus meeting for educators the researcher presented the themes that the students had identified as most important and asked for their feedback.

The themes generated through the multivariate procedures described above were then analyzed according to the theoretical approaches to the academic achievement of culturally diverse students described in the literature review. The themes also allowed the researcher to place emphasis in the literature review on what the findings may imply. The researcher attempted to blend the data with relevant literature in order to question or confirm aspects of this theory.

Another form of triangulation involves informant verification. Also referred to as member checking (Liu, 1996; Ratcliff, 2002), this involves supplying research participants with a copy of the data analysis, and allowing them to clarify their viewpoint (Hueser, 1999). Student participants in this study were given the opportunity to correct, elaborate, and clarify themselves in a second meeting following their initial interviews. They were also presented with an initial analysis of the data from all the student interviews and asked for any feedback they had to offer to make the analysis more complete and accurate. Similarly parent and teacher participants were given opportunities to supply feedback to the initial analysis of student data.

By referring to study participants as co-researchers, the researcher also hoped to discourage them from viewing her as an authoritative figure. This was particularly important in the student cases, where it was recognized that the researcher's role as school psychologist might affect student dialogues. Studies have indicated that some students may attempt to please authoritative figures by expressing what they think the researcher wants to hear

(Aaroe & Nelson, 1998). Conversely, this authoritative role may antagonize other students and retard their responses (Borg & Gall, 1983).

## **H. Limitations**

Many of the student participants' perspectives and what they choose to discuss were similar. The generalizability of these results for other students with Iranian backgrounds is, however, left up to the reader. By providing rich, thick description of the research situation they can determine how closely their situations match the research situation (Walker, 1980; Firestone, 1993). The findings may be considered more transferable to other young people with Iranian background at schools with similar contexts. For example, it is likely that other students with Iranian backgrounds also attending the school where the study took place will have views which are shared by the student participants. The less similar the context of other students from the student participants, the greater the questionability of the transferability of the research results.

It is also important to note once again that findings are also presented on issues in which student participants held diverse or contradictory views. This also allows readers to better determine the transferability of results to other students. The greater the diversity of the perspectives on particular issues, the greater the chance that other students may also have differing views.

As an ethnographic researcher, the researcher determined her roles to be primarily facilitator, documenter and interpreter. The ways she attempted to minimize bias in the two former roles were previously discussed, and included listening to the words of the students as closely as possible. The student participants selected the critical aspects which they felt had contributed to their academic success and failures. As an interpreter, however, the researcher also acknowledges that hers is a biased, outsider's view. Participant perspectives have been interpreted in light of the researcher's Western, white, female, middle-class teaching and psychology background and this is a limitation of the completed study. Some of the researcher characteristics and experiences, however, may have helped minimize the negative effects. Having spent close to a decade in the Middle East she has been fortunate to have befriended many Iranians. She has also traveled throughout Iran. While there is a great distinction between those of Arab and Persian ancestry, the knowledge and experience she has gained about the Muslim religion and how it often permeates every aspect of culture

places her in a position in which she may be better able to interpret behaviour and feelings than another outsider may.

### **I. From Design to Data Collection and Analysis**

As the design of the study emerged the researcher continued to focus on its overall purpose. This provided a guide as to how the research needed to be carried out. Equally important, however, were the questions of how it could be done in an ethical, methodical, trustworthy, dependable and consistent way, issues which were addressed in this chapter. This planning served to increase the researcher's anticipation of obtaining findings and making sense of them. This is the focus of the next two chapters.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

An overall purpose of this study is to provide information that can assist educators within the school and the district where the study takes place to better understand their students with Iranian backgrounds. The focus began on students' perceptions of what factors help them and other students with Iranian backgrounds to experience success in school, and what factors make it difficult for them. Five main themes were identified by the student participants, and the data is presented in this chapter according to these themes. Consistent with the goal of ethnography, the data remains the words of the students as much as possible. Data was also gathered through observation, and from teacher and parent participants. This data helps to determine the match between the students' words and their actions, and between their perceptions and those of their parents and teachers. This data is presented under the main themes when it clarifies, confirms or contradicts data gathered from the student interviews.

The students appeared eager to critique their education. They seemed to feel free to talk about problems with school and anxious to suggest ways to make the school better for themselves and other students. As the study proceeded a large amount of data was gathered about the students which, although the students themselves did not relate to schooling experiences, the literature review had determined to be important in the academic achievement of culturally diverse students. These findings are presented first because of their implications towards theory and research, and most importantly because they are critical to a clearer understanding of the students participating in the study.

As noted much of this chapter is made up of the words of the students. This and other data presented is discussed in relation to previous research and literature in the following chapter (**Analysis, Synthesis, and Discussion**).

#### **A. The Student Participants**

As the researcher planned the study she found little information on students with Iranian backgrounds at the school. There was no information on the number of these students in the school. When the researcher shared the number of Persian students registered in English as a Second Language (sixty-nine in the fall of 2002) and the number of Persian

families with at least one child enrolled at the school (ninety to one hundred), both the parent and educator groups were surprised at these numbers. Both groups had expected these numbers to be higher. Participants from all three groups offered an explanation that Iranian students are more verbal, and may be more of a presence than students with other ethnic backgrounds. A Grade nine male student, for example, stated:

*I think that Iranian students are more verbal. I tend to be quite social with my friends and I think it could be from part of my upbringing.*

While none of the student participants or their parents suggested a link between this perception and school performance, teacher participants related it to classroom problems. They reported that in general the Iranian students were very talkative in class and that this tended to create discipline problems. One of the teachers indicated that although he may have difficulty learning the names of students in new classes, he is likely to know the names of all the Persian boys within three days. Other teachers agreed they had similar experiences. The teachers also expressed concern that some Iranian students seemed to be at school for social reasons only. Observation data generally supported the notion that Iranian students may be more verbal in classes than other students. They had more interactions than other students in the classes observed with both other students and their teachers. There was, however, no evidence during the observations that this greater interaction created disciplinary problems. The interactions were generally discrete and did not seem to disrupt classroom procedure. All students generally behaved in a way which indicated their acceptance of a learning environment with the teacher being in control of the class. The students were primarily attentive and serious. It is important to reiterate, however, that the presence of the researcher in the classroom may have discouraged some students from using inappropriate or disruptive behaviour.

Of the initial eleven student participants in the study three moved out of the country during the school year in which the data collection took place. Furthermore, several of the students indicated that they were uncertain as to the future plans of their families. The mothers of two of the students who indicated that they felt their families would move back to Iran in the future reported that they had no such plans. The teachers reported that some Iranian students seem to be at school in a temporary fashion and that this causes problem behaviours. Parent participants disagreed that students may regard their enrollment in school in such a way. As mentioned above, no observations were made which indicated the students were not serious about their schoolwork.

A very important finding of this study includes the diversity found amongst the student participants. Each of the eight student participants' parents were born in Iran and the students in countries outside of Canada, and thus the students could all be considered first generation immigrants. The amount of time they had been in Canada and where they came from, however, varied considerably. Two of the students were born in the United States and came to Canada when they were toddlers. One of the students was born and lived in Dubai before coming to Canada around the age of ten. The remaining students were born in Iran. The students had been residing in Canada from between six months to twelve years. Half were Canadian citizens.

The student participants also held diverse religious views, although all reported at least some adherence to Muslim beliefs and/or practices. One of the students who had been in Canada the longest amount of time seemed to be most influenced by his religion. This student indicated that he prays five times daily, that he strictly follows rules governing the holy time of Ramadan, and that he was learning the Koran. Another student also indicated that she prayed five times daily, fasted during Ramadan, goes to the mosque fairly regularly and is learning the Koran. This girl, however, considered herself "not really" religious.

Most of the other student participants indicated that religion was not a big part of their lives in Canada. In the words of one student:

*It isn't that big a part in my life but I still believe in religion, like I do believe it has some purpose in life but I don't let it control my life.*

Some indicated that they never prayed, and some that they did, but not on a regular basis. One said that she sometimes fasted during Ramadan, while the other students reported that they did not do so. There were no observations made of students visibly displaying aspects of their religion at the school, with one exception. This was one female who was observed in the hallway to be wearing the hijab. No other students were seen to do so.

Several students mentioned religion had been much more of an influence on them in Iran. One girl stated:

*It (religion) does play a role here too but I think that people are more concerned about religion in Iran and people here are not as much concerned but I don't see any difficulties for someone who is more religious to come to school here. There are people who might want to wear some different clothing or something but I think that's not difficult because there are people from all sorts here so they don't feel like they are really left out or feel that they are different from all the other people.*

Several of the other students who indicated that they were not strongly religious also stressed that they were very tolerant and respectful towards those who were. At least one student participant suggested that this tolerance and respect may not be shared by all students at the school. When he began talking about a student at the school who wore the hejab the researcher asked him whether this may make it difficult for her in school. The student replied:

*It matters who it is, who is actually looking at them. Like for me definitely not, she's still a great person, she's nice. But for other people looking at her it might matter.*

Despite the diversity of the group all student participants indicated that their Iranian background was important to them. For example, when asked how important his Iranian background is to him, one student replied:

*It's part of who I am.... It's my culture. I follow all the traditions, the culture. I speak Farsi in my house. We have Iranian food all the time. I go to Farsi classes. Every Friday we have this mosque we go to.*

Another student indicated that she was very proud to be a Persian and that she always stresses the good points of her Iranian culture. When asked what these points included she replied:

*There are good points in every culture. Like I think we had a pretty strong history and past and these sort of things. We like foreigners. We don't only just like Persians. We like every people in the world. I think Persians are friendly people.*

Other students also mentioned the rich history and the friendliness and tolerance of the people amongst the characteristics of those sharing their culture. Several students also identified food when asked what aspects of the culture they were most proud of.

Pride in their Persian heritage was also evident during a Multicultural Day at the school in which booths were set up featuring different foods and objects from a number of different ethnic groups. During her attendance at the Iranian booth the researcher saw many of the students and parents who were participating in the study and most proudly showed her things they had brought or insisted she sample food they had prepared for the event. Parents also brought books for the researcher to focus group meetings which they thought were most representative of their country and culture.

The student participants were all asked how they would describe themselves. One indicated he describes himself as “Canadian-Iranian” and another as a “Persian-American Canadian”. One more recently arrived student indicated that she identified herself as

“Iranian”. Another student, who had Canadian citizenship, also indicated that she would describe herself as “Iranian” and not as “Canadian” or even as “Iranian-Canadian”. One student said it would depend on the situation in which he was asked to describe himself as to what he would reply. Two other students described themselves as “Persian”. One of them, however, felt that it was important to clarify this description. He stated:

*When I describe myself I'd say I'm Persian definitely, like it's important that they get the point that I'm Persian. But it's also important for them to know that I'm not big on the religious stuff. I just want them to know that right away.*

Throughout the interviews the students most often referred to their ethnicity and language as “Persian”. When asked if they preferred the use of this word to “Iranian” and “Farsi”, however, they indicated that it did not matter to them. When the parent participants were similarly asked about this they also indicated that they did not have a preference. Some of the parents felt that the former provided a greater indication of their rich cultural heritage.

Several of the students indicated that they felt that it is important for them to combine aspects of both Iranian and Canadian cultures in order to help form their own identity. One stated:

*I think I have to get the good from some of my culture and the good from Canadian culture and then mix it up and try to be something in between because I don't totally agree with the culture here and I don't totally agree with my own culture so it's the best to take the good points from each culture.*

Another student stated:

*To me it's really important to keep that background and not suddenly change everything. To keep the good things about that and take the good things from here.*

Another student eluded to the difficulties immigrant children may have with their parent relationships when they come to Canada:

*The kids that come are trying to be a new person, like someone who has lived here for a long time, or more than five or six years. These kids are forming a new culture. Their moms and dads already have their culture. It's difficult for them to convince their kids to have the culture they have.*

When this student was asked how she deals with this she replied:

*I take some from each.*

All the student participants indicated that successful academic performance was important to them. Two felt it was most important. One of them stated:

*I know that for now there are other things but the most important thing I do now is studying for my future and all that so I find I don't want to waste my times doing things that I'm not going to get any results from in the future so I think it's wiser to study now and then I can do all the other stuff when I'm a little older.*

Similarly, another student stated:

*I know what I want to do in the future and that's why we came to Canada because there are more universities here and in Iran it's much harder to get into the university and there are fewer universities with a big population so that's why I'm here and I think I have to study. It's the most important thing that I have to do right now is to study. I also have fun. I'm not just sitting at home studying for 12 hours. I have lots of fun.*

Most of the students had definite plans for after their graduation and these plans all indicated that the students had high self expectations. They mentioned university and college, and aspirations to careers in fashion design, dentistry, engineering, and law.

Some of the students felt that having money and material things was important to them, some that it was not. The parents agreed that money and image were a major concern amongst their children, although some felt that it was for teenagers in general. The teachers felt that having money and a certain image was very important to the Iranian student population and that this sometimes interfered with their academic performance. The researcher did note that in general the Iranian students at the school dressed fashionably and that many had cellular phones and drove new luxury vehicles.

## **B. Themes**

Five primary themes emerged from what the students identified as contributing to their academic successes and difficulties in school. These include language, family, peers, school, and racism

### **1. Language**

While it would be difficult to rank the five themes which emerged from the students themselves in order of importance, the one area which they spoke most about had to do with language. Most of the student participants indicated that learning English is the greatest barrier for newcomers from Iran and was so personally for themselves. Many of the students related their own difficulties with beginning school in their new country with little knowledge of English. For example, one girl stated:

*I didn't like it (When she came here). I was lonely. I didn't have anybody to talk with. I didn't even know a word, like I didn't know any English.*

Several other students also indicated that they did not know any English when they came to Canada. Two of the students who had most recently arrived indicated, however, that they had studied English privately when they lived in Iran, and felt they were fairly fluent with it.

Each student participant stated that Farsi was their first language and that they speak primarily Farsi in their home. There was a great variation in their reported knowledge and expertise with English. All but one of the students agreed it was easier academically wise to come to Canada as young as possible because it is then easier to learn English. The remaining student felt it was better for students to come in Grade 6 or 7, “*when they know the mother tongue well*”.

The three student participants who have been in Canada the longest indicated that they speak primarily English with their friends at school. One of the students who has been in Canada for five years and one who had been in Canada six months indicated that they spoke a mixture of the two languages in school outside of classes. The remaining students indicated that they spoke primarily Farsi outside of class time. Observations confirmed that the majority of students with Iranian background spoke Farsi in the hallways and English in their classrooms.

The majority of the students indicated that teachers at the school did not like them to use Farsi during classes. Most of them agreed that this was for their own benefit, so that they may have needed exposure to English.

The parent participants also identified language as the primary concern for newcomer students from Iran and felt that it is better for Iranian families to come to Canada when their children are young.

Although the teachers recognized that language was a barrier for Iranian students, it did not dominate their discussions as it did with the students and parents. The teachers also felt that there was a new trend for Iranian families to immigrate when the children were older and that this makes it more difficult for them in school. The teachers felt that it was very important that the parents understand that it takes time for newcomer students to learn the language and that their children may not graduate as quickly as they wish them to.

## 2. Family

Many of the students and their parents indicated that their families had come to Canada for the education of the student. The student participants felt that their parents had high expectations for them. Their comments in these regards included:

*I know that if I go to university my dad is going to be so happy.*

*They put pressure and say you'd better do well on this test or else. And the "or else" is nothing. It's their disappointment, which sometimes hurts even more. Or they try to take my video games away or cut the cable. Stuff like that.*

*Parents are parents. They want you to do well in school, right? My mom says, try your best, I will appreciate whatever you do. She helps me out, well not helps me out, but she encourages me to do my best. She says if you do this, I'll give you money, like bribery and stuff (chuckles). I guess she doesn't say you have to get straight A's, but she says try to get as many A's and B's as you can.*

*My mom has high expectations. She puts a lot of pressure on me. She asks every day about my marks.*

*Parents put pressure on the kids. Like I'm into fashion design. My dad wants me to do engineering. What will happen? I don't know.*

The latter two comments give indication of excessive parental pressure. The parents themselves were worried that they were putting too much pressure on their children. The teachers identified cheating as a very big problem amongst the Iranian student population and related it to possible parental aspects including high expectations for their children. They felt that perhaps cheating was not viewed the same in the Iranian culture as it is in the mainstream culture. However, the parent participants disputed this line of thought. One of the student participants discussed a personal incidence involving cheating, however a description and analysis of this incident is not included here for ethical reasons.

Half of the student participants reported that their fathers were working out of the country and that they missed them a lot. As one explained:

*Most Persian fathers they are always traveling between the countries. Not my father. He has work in Iran but some people do it for him. He doesn't have to go there. He stays with us.*

Most of the students also expressed concern that their mothers were lonely. The parents pointed out that moving to a new country was difficult for all members of the family, but particularly for mothers and they are normally the ones who would be in a position to help their children in school. They related that when the mother does not understand the language or the school system they are of little help to their children. Many of the students felt that lack of attention and loneliness are factors in misbehaviour and poor academic performance, and their parents agreed.

Several students spoke of the background and education of the parents as being connected to academic performance. One girl said:

*I mean like those students whose parents had university degrees and studies, they act a lot different from the other ones who just had the money and they found a big amount of money in a short time and then they just came and they changed their culture really fast and wanted to be like Canadians. But they are confused, I'm not sure and they do some stuff that is not really nice. I think that's about it. I think the most important thing is that the parents of the people, like they have university degrees or have they studied or not, because they are the people who are teaching the same stuff to their children.*

Most of the student participants also mentioned that the amount of religion in the family is a big factor on everything else, including academic behaviours such as studying and getting good marks.

### **3. Peers**

The majority of the student participants noted at some point that the different nationalities of students tended to stick together. The researcher made this observation in the hallways and in classes where the Persian students tended to stay close to other Persian students. The students described the large number of Iranian students in their school as helpful for newcomer students. In the words of one student:

*In this school a lot of students here are Iranian. There are a lot of Iranians in this school so if you just came from Iran it won't be hard to make new friends and that's really helpful.*

One of the student participants had moved to the school from another in the district because of the larger Iranian student population. He explained his decision:

*I just wanted to have more Persian friends, that was the main reason, because I only had ten people there, less, six people. I was so happy (after he had changed schools) because I had so many friends here, so it was all good.*

One student indicated having other Persians around could make it easier for newcomers to learn English. She said:

*They (newcomers) can start from a little lower level if they don't know how to speak good English and all the other Persian people who know English and Persian, they can help them and I think it's a really good atmosphere to study in.*

Many of the student participants, however, indicated that the large Iranian student population at the school could be regarded as a mixed blessing. They reported that although it provides the advantage of making friends more quickly and easily, it can slow the acquisition of English language. One student stated:

*Being a multicultural school has benefits, but also bad things. You have friends, but speaking-wise I have forgotten how to speak English.*

The student who had moved to the school in order to have more friends stated:

*It is so hard to get used to a new system, so they just hang around together, I think you've seen it at the school, they just hang around and they don't speak in English so my English has gone down since I got here.*

At the end of the school year this student told the researcher that he had decided to go back to his original school so he could bring his English level back up. He expressed concern about his accent and wanted to go back to Iran someday and speak in English without an accent.

Those who had been in Canada longer tended to report that their friends came from a mixture of nationalities. One student participant reported that just a few of his friends are Iranian, and that he has known them since elementary school. Another student who had been in Canada since he was two years old stated:

*Well, I see a lot of the Persians, they really hang tight together, like in the hall and stuff – they are probably out there right now in their groups, but I guess whatever they like to do they can do. I like to be around different people so I'm usually out and about everywhere - I have some Persian friends, not a lot. I have more just most cultural friends.*

Many of the other student participants agreed that their friends were exclusively or primarily Persian and several students indicated that it was hard to make “Canadian” friends. One student indicated that he felt that this could be attributed to cultural differences, differences which left him feeling inferior. He stated:

*I have a couple of Canadian friends but I don't feel really comfortable talking to them. I think my mind is sort of different from them. I don't mean better, just different. Sometimes I just feel like I lack something.*

Extracurricular activities were identified as a way to make friends from other ethnic groups. All three of the female student participants and one male participant reported that they were not involved in any extracurricular activities. Three male participants indicated that their extracurricular activities were limited to some sports. The remaining male was involved in sports, music, volunteer work, student council and a youth advisory committee. Parent participants stressed the need to encourage newcomer students in extracurricular activities. The teachers also brought up sports and team activities as helpful for the adjustment of new arrivals. Both parents and teachers suggested that Iranian students tended not to take part in such activities. Researcher observations supported the reality of this perception as few Iranian students were seen to participate in extracurricular activities, with the exception of a small number of males in sport-related activities.

#### **4. School**

School factors centered around three main topics. These included teachers, differences in schools in Iran and the school they were now attending, and classes. Beginning with the teachers, the vast majority of the students said that the teachers, administrators and counsellors at the school are approachable and helpful. One girl stated:

*They told me if I had any questions, we can help you. Anything. They did everything for me. I felt so comfortable going to them.*

The parent participants also indicated that they felt that the majority of the teachers, counsellors and administrators at the school were helpful to the students. The researcher often observed students with Iranian backgrounds and their parents coming and going from counselling and administrative offices, which gives provides further indication that they found their services available and useful.

Most of the students indicated that the teachers treated them fairly. A couple of the students brought up particular teachers that they had difficulty with. These findings will be

included in the next section on racism. The teachers pointed out that blaming the teacher for a student problem behaviour was common practice amongst many Iranian students, and more so than for students of other backgrounds.

Most of the student participants felt it would be helpful to have more teachers with Iranian backgrounds at the school. As noted earlier, observations indicated a minimal presence of such teachers at the school. One mentioned that teachers with an international perspective would be beneficial. Most agreed it would be helpful if teachers understood the Persian way of life better. For example one student stated:

*You'd think they would just understand us better. You know what I'm saying?*

The researcher then asked: "Understand your Persian culture?" To this the student replied:

*Yes, like our background and what we had back there because the whole thing is so different.*

Another student stated:

*It would be helpful if they (the teachers) had information on different nationalities. For example, a lot of teachers think Persians and Arabs are the same. They don't even know they speak different languages.*

Several of the students provided an example of how teachers' lack of awareness of the Iranian culture can make it confusing for newcomer students. As an example several mentioned that according to their culture, adults, including teachers, who know students should acknowledge them when they see them. Iranian students can become confused and hurt when their teachers ignore them in the hallway. The parents also brought up the point that in the Iranian culture children are taught to acknowledge and be polite to adults, and that adults always acknowledge children they know when they meet.

There was one student who felt that gaining an understanding of Persian culture was not necessary for teachers. He asserted:

*Personally I don't think it's a good idea (that teachers try and understand Persian culture better). They would have to learn lots and they (Persians) are just people. People are people. Teachers shouldn't have to learn about them.*

The parents felt that it was important for teachers to better understand the Iranian culture. The teacher participants indicated that they also felt that this was important, and several indicated that this was a reason why they had attended the focus group meetings. The researcher experienced several encounters with teachers indicating some misunderstandings of the most basic aspects of Iranian culture, including the language spoken and mistaking

Iranians as Arab. The teachers also indicated that it would be very helpful for them if there were more Iranian teachers on staff so that they may have someone to help them gain a better understanding of the Iranian student population at the school.

Another factor identified by the students as influencing the academic performance of students with Iranian backgrounds included the differences between schools and schooling in Iran and Canada. These reported differences included more advanced classes and stricter and more formal teachers in Iran than in the school they were attending now in Canada.

One student felt that some of the differences might make it easier for her in the school she was now attending. She explained:

*In Iran the number of subjects and the pressure is a lot more than here and the amount of homework and studying so it's actually easier for me to study here because I'm used to having lots of homework and lots of studying but the pressure is really low here, so I find it easier to study.*

Most of the students, however, related the differences between the schools as contributing to behaviour difficulties. One student, for example, stated:

*There were many changes when I came here, like, we didn't have girls in our school in Iran so, I don't know, the whole system was different. In Iran it was harder but when I came here because everything is so hard back there in Iran at schools so in the whole time just people here want to goof around, even if they study, they just want to mess the class off. Sometimes but not always. So maybe that's the problem, everybody goofs around here. Like you know they aren't used to the system, you know what I'm saying? I know that's not a good thing.*

Another suggested:

*I know a lot of the stuff in Iran is much more advanced, like the Math and stuff like that. So, like Grade 10 math there would be Grade 12 here. So I guess when they come they would start getting a little bored and stuff around here.*

Another student related that many students arriving from Iran are confused over how to handle new-found freedom. She stated:

*I think this is a reason why some kids here goof off. Because they feel as if they now have less work and the teachers are less strict and now that the whole school setting is more friendly, well not more friendly, but more open to ideas, they have more freedom and they go overboard with it.*

The factor of increased freedom was also discussed by another student. She mentioned that many of the Iranian boys get into trouble at school, and she struggled with an explanation:

*I don't know. They want to get attention. I'm not sure. I can't understand them. Why do they act that way? I have never seen Persian boys in Iran do this. I haven't seen a single boy doing the things they do here there. They are so changed. I don't know. I think because they don't have the freedom to do these things at school, like if they start to fight they are going to be separated fast but here, because one thing is because the school is bigger here than in Iran, like the private schools and most people go to private schools and its bigger here and they think they can do whatever they want. I think they just confuse freedom with whatever is in their minds. They can't control themselves. I don't know. They have problems.*

Several student participants pointed out that, with their new freedom some Iranian students are very demonstrative with the opposite sex and that there is a lot of kissing in the halls.

The researcher also made these observations in the hallways of the school.

Parent participants also felt that difficulty dealing with “freedom” was a huge aspect of students performing poorly in school. The teachers also brought up the fact that some students seemed to have difficulty dealing with new freedom.

Turning to the factor regarding classes, an interesting finding was that, while parent participants stressed the need for good home-school communication regarding classes and programs, the student participants did not express any greater need for such information. The parents felt that such communication was a significant factor in the academic achievement of students, and that there was a great need for increased efforts in this regard. The teachers also felt that an orientation which includes parents and a Farsi interpreter for all newcomer students would be beneficial. A school counsellor pointed out to the teachers that a system such as this had been in place at the school for twelve years. She also said that in addition to this orientation a counsellor spends at least one hour with each new parent.

The majority of the students had had at least one English as a Second Language (ESL) class. They all reported that these classes were helpful. One said:

*When I came here I didn't even know how to say hello. ESL helped me in grades six and seven.*

The student participants were much less sure of the helpfulness of transition classes. These are classes designed for students who have had English as a Second Language classes

but who still require extra support before being integrated into regular classes. Several students indicated that they were in such classes, but felt they should be in regular classes.

Three of the eight students had had Learning Assistance classes and said they found them very helpful. Many of the students agreed that Physical Education was given much more importance in their current school than it was in Iran.

Several of the students felt they were held back in classes when they entered the school and others reported that they felt this was common practice at the school. Two of the newer arrivals were, however, happy with their placement. Neither had been registered in an English as a Second Language class, but one had been put into a transitional Social Studies 10 class. One of these students stated:

*Most foreigners, not all foreigners, but the Persian people I know who have come here – they usually put them in a lower class than they have to be, but I was right in my own grade and I was in a regular class so that was really nice.*

Most of the parent participants also felt that many newcomer students were held back or put into classes such as English as a Second Language and transition classes and that these classes may not be too helpful. One parent who had been in Canada among the longest indicated that she felt that the school did place the students fairly. The teachers felt that parents need to understand the time it takes for students to learn English at a level with which they can work academically in regular classes. Some stated that they felt that the available transition classes may not be enough to offer the Iranian students and that this issue requires further examination in the school.

## **5. Racism**

As previously mentioned, most of the students felt that their teachers treated Iranian students fairly. Most, however, provided one or two examples they had heard about where this was not the case. For example, one student said:

*Yes, like my other friend. He's Persian and Mr. xxx called him a stupid Persian.*

[Note: This teacher is no longer employed by the district]

One student felt strongly, however, that there was a good deal of teacher discrimination towards Persian students. The following conversation took place with the student (Researcher words are in quotations):

*Teachers don't like me, they don't like Persians that much. Mostly the ones who aren't perfect, the ones who don't speak perfect English. My friends have noticed this - some of the teachers aren't very good to Persians.*

“Here at this school?”

*Yes, especially my math teacher.*

“How do you mean?”

*Like, they weren't treating Persians very well. Like, my math teacher, she hated Persians. Like whenever I would ask something or anything she wouldn't be nice but even if she didn't know me before.*

“Would she ignore you or...?”

*Not really. She wasn't a racist but sometimes she wasn't like how she was to other kids. She wasn't like that with Persians. She was a bit grumpy.*

“Do you think the other students see her the same way?”

*Yes. Like everybody was saying that. Even like non-Persians. Like I had a couple of Canadian friends and they were saying, yeah, she hates Persians.*

“Are there other teachers that you feel are not...?”

*Not really but they sometimes, I feel they just follow the same thing, like sometimes they don't like Persians.*

“Do you have any examples that you can give me?”

*One of my friends, she was born here but she is half Indian and half African and she told me that this one teacher hated Iranians. She was telling me that when she first came here Miss xxx wasn't just very nice with her so she was making a joke, she said yeah, she thought I was Persian. Yeah, she knew it.*

Parent participants did not feel that teachers discriminated against their students. The teachers also felt that teachers did not discriminate against Iranian students. They asserted that many Iranian students were quick to “play the racism card” when things were not going their way.

One student hinted as to how she deals with cases of discrimination. When asked if she had ever seen any cases of discrimination at the school she replied:

*I don't want to get involved with others. I just want to be on my own. I don't want to be involved.*

One student discussed the stereotyping of Iranian students:

*There are lots of different classes of people. That's what bothers me. Because, as you know, there are lots of Persian students who are doing wrong things in school, like they are always getting noticed and attention and stuff and that's what bothers me because a Canadian doesn't know that there are different people, like they think all Persians are the same and if one of them does a wrong thing they think they're all bad. There are some people, I don't know how they get to Canada because you have to spend a lot of money to come here and invest lots of money but I don't know how do they just get here and they do some stuff that makes us be ashamed of who we are. But there are lots of good Persian students, too. But those people who do the bad stuff, most people see the bad things first and remember the bad things and forget the good ones. So that's a problem I see.*

Several of the students reported that they were bothered by the way Iranians are portrayed in the media. One commented:

*I have noticed this (that the media primarily portrays the bad side). Like on tv they say "Muslim terrorist". This is a contradiction. There is no Muslim terrorist. The media points people to having anger to a group of people.*

Another reported:

*From the newspaper people get the wrong impression about different cultures.*

Another stated:

*... and like in tv here something that I didn't like – when they talk about Persian culture or Middle Eastern culture, when they show the country, they always showing the black ladies. They don't show the real thing. They don't go places where young boys and girls are all having fun. They just show the worst part of the city and the dirtiest and the ugliest people. That's what I didn't like.*

Several students talked about the impact of September 11, 2001. One said:

*Since the attacks some people are scared of anyone Muslim. They will exaggerate and overreact to some things.*

Two of the male student participants indicated that because of 9-11 they were careful about how they portrayed themselves. The following conversation took place with the student who said that it would depend on the situation as to how he identified himself. (Researcher's words are in quotations)

*I usually say I'm Persian but I can't do that all the time, people get pissed off when I say Persian, I don't know why.*

“Who would?”

*If it's something related to the culture, they think I'm a terrorist or, I don't know. I don't look like one.*

“Who would think that?”

*Just ordinary people. Sometimes they might think like that.*

“You get that feeling that's what they're thinking?”

*Yes. Like right after the attacks and everything. Right after those attacks, my friends everywhere we would go would say don't say you're Persian, even if they were Persian.*

Another female student concurred:

*It's true that some (Iranian students) have the feeling that some people think they are a terrorist now. I don't know if it's that much in the school, I think it's more in the community.*

Many felt that Iranians who have been here a long time can be prejudiced towards newer arrivals. This was evident in one student's statements:

*One thing I can think of is that some kids that do come from Iran, like they don't seem to be the best students. How to say it? Like some younger Persian kids they just seem so cocky all the time and they seem to be getting into trouble. I'm not quite sure but it seems like that.*

Another student, when asked about students discriminating against other students at the school replied:

*I have never seen a Caucasian do this to a Persian. I have seen Persians discriminate against Persians though.*

### **C. Conclusion to the Findings**

Undoubtedly it is the words of the student participants through which the researcher learned the most throughout the course of the current study. The value of listening to students' experiences and thoughts to enhance educators' understanding of academic achievement and to help guide school reform to increase it became most evident to her. Furthermore, getting to know more about the students' lives increased the researchers' desire to hear more words from more students. It is hoped that this chapter may inspire other educators to enter the worlds of more of their students.

## CHAPTER V

### ANALYSIS, SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Theoretical Approaches to the Academic Achievement of Culturally Diverse Students

The findings of this study confirm weaknesses or shortcomings in each of the primary approaches to academic achievement of culturally diverse students which were presented in the literature review. It was suggested in this review that no one approach can take into account all the factors related to academic achievement. The findings from the current study which had the greatest implications towards aspects of these approaches are presented in this section.

##### 1. Genetic Inferiority and Cultural Deprivation Theory

That each of the eight student participants in the study could be described as successful in school serves to further discredit genetic and cultural deprivation theories. The findings, as has previous research (For example, Ford, 1993; Fordham, 1988; Nieto, 1999, 2000; Phelan, Davidson & Yu, 1998), confirm that ethnic heritage does not presuppose underachievement.

##### 2. Economic and Social Reproduction Theory

Economic and social reproduction theories also focus on the failure of minority students. The Iranian students, their school and their community described in this study corroborate Barrera's (1995) assertion that a distinction must be made between cultural diversity and poverty.

##### 3. Secondary Cultural Discontinuity Theory

Findings of this study indicate that criticisms of the immigrant/involuntary typology first presented by Ogbu (1987) are valid. One criticism of this typology discussed in the literature review is that it is too dichotomous. This seems a relevant argument in the case of the student and parent participants in this study. The families could primarily be described as "voluntary immigrants" in that they have generally come to Canada on their own free will. Several, however, indicated that they would not have come if it were not for the political situation in Iran. Several indicated that they may some day return to their homeland. Some

of the study participants thus share elements of both voluntary immigrants and involuntary minorities, rather than being in one exclusive group. It may also indicate that some Iranian immigrants may be less committed to life in their new country than those in other immigrant groups.

Furthermore, Ogbu's typology assumes that members of a particular cultural group share the same characteristics. The findings of this study suggest that Iranian Canadians in the setting where the study took place have diverse backgrounds, views and values.

There are, however, some findings of this study which do fit with aspects of cultural discontinuity theory. Ogbu (1993) suggests that many voluntary immigrants come to North America with the claim it is for the children's education, which many of the student and parent participants suggested was their case. According to Ogbu, members of this group are also most likely to succeed in school, which the student participants in this study were doing.

The participants in this study adhere to varying degrees to the three factors which Ogbu (1993) suggests account for the academic success of voluntary immigrants. The first factor is that they feel the education they are receiving is superior to the education they would be receiving in their homeland. Although some of the participants' comments suggested that they held this notion, most did not hold this view. Many students and parents pointed out their perception that the classes in Iran, particularly Sciences and Mathematics, were more advanced than these classes in Canadian schools.

The second factor is the belief of voluntary minorities that they are treated better by their new schools than they would be treated by the schools in their homeland. Many of the student participants felt that the teachers in their Canadian school were much friendlier and more helpful than teachers in Iran.

The third factor Ogbu identifies is that voluntary minorities teach their children to accept, internalize, and follow school rules of behaviour. The parents emphasize to their children the importance of acquiring job-related skills, proficiency in the English language, and basic skills in reading, writing and math. Ogbu further indicates that voluntary immigrants hold a folk theory of school success. The high marks and expectations of the student participants and their parents seems to indicate that they do share the idea that they are in a land of opportunity and that they can get ahead through education and hard work. Several of the students indicated that doing well in school was most important to them at this point and time in their lives. Whether these traits are attributable to affiliation with voluntary immigrants is unclear in light of the recent research indicating that generational status is a

powerful influence on the success of students (Fuligni, 1997; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). This research shows that first generation immigrants, such as the students participating in the current study, are much more successful than later generations. Native-born teenagers often begin to doubt the return they would receive from academic endeavours and are sometimes skeptical of the opportunities available in American society (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Adolescents of latter generations are also more likely to become involved in problem behaviour and exhibit greater psychological distress than those from immigrant families (Fuligni, 1997).

#### **4. Cultural Incompatibilities Theory**

Cultural incompatibilities or cultural mismatch theory has been criticized for its assumption that cultural differences between home and school necessarily create difficulties and problems. While the student participants in the current study acknowledged that differences may account for some problem behaviours, they themselves are testimony to the fact that such differences do not necessarily lead to difficulties.

The findings of this study do, however, give some support to aspects of the cultural incompatibilities theory. The student participants did speak of differences between the schools in Iran and the one they are now attending as creating difficulties for them and they often provided this as a reason why some Iranian students may be acting out. The students mentioned that in Iran schools were segregated according to sex, the classes were more difficult, they had more homework and examinations, the teachers were more strict and less tolerant, and that the school building was smaller and much more crowded. They suggested that these differences allowed students coming from Iran a new-found “freedom”, which many were not equipped to handle. Parent participants also spoke at length about the difficulty that new “freedom” could present to immigrant children. Both some student and parent participants felt that how they handle it is largely determined by family practices. Few studies have discussed the existence of the notion of a new feeling of freedom in teenage immigrants and the effects it may have on their academic achievement. Tanners (1997) did address the issue in her study of immigrant children in New York City schools. More research in the area may indicate whether it may be a relatively greater factor in the academic achievement of Iranian immigrant students than it may be for those coming from other countries.

Cultural incompatibilities theory also suggests that a common response for high achieving students is to deny or ignore home/school differences. Some students did suggest in some of their comments that they may try and block out awareness of differences. This colour blindness mentality was most evident in the comment from the student who felt that it was not important for teachers to learn about the Persian culture. His reasoning was because “*People are people*”. None of the students, however, attributed any of their success to adherence to the notion of “acting white”, a phenomenon found in previous research (For example, Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Gibbs & Huang, 1998; Mahiri, 1998). In fact, the students in this study, all of whom could be considered successful, all indicated that their Persian background was very important to them, and voiced and displayed their pride in it.

### **5. Resistance Theory**

Resistance theory suggests that those students who most resist assimilation are most likely to perform poorly in school (Fine, 1991). The students in the current study did not appear to resist assimilation in school beyond most of their preference to hang out with other Iranian students. Most felt that it was inappropriate to speak Farsi at school unless it was in the hallway with their friends. They tended to agree, as did their parents and teachers, that Farsi should not be spoken in the classroom. It was observed that the students did limit their Farsi to hallway interactions at the school.

As previously discussed, there is a growing amount of research which challenges the notions of resistance theory. This research suggests that “the more that students are involved in resisting assimilation while maintaining their culture and language, the more successful they will be in school” (Nieto, 2000, p. 290). The student participants in this study all maintained their culture to some degree. For example, they all spoke primarily Farsi at home. They all acknowledged that their Persian culture was important to them, and many of them pointed out the good aspects of this culture. This ethnic pride was also noted in researcher observations. Studies by Deyhle (1995) and Portes and Rumbaut (1996) indicate that having a good sense of cultural heritage and connection seems to be positively correlated with school success, and the findings of the current study would give support to this hypothesis.

## **6. Bicultural Developmental or Negotiation Theory**

Many of the student participants described a process of creating their own culture rather than of assimilating or resisting the new one. This finding is consistent with Hoffman's (1988) findings in her study of Iranians in American schools. This finding lends support for the more recently emerging theory identified previously as bicultural developmental or negotiation theory. This theory suggests that when students move to a new country they develop their own cultures distinct from both their parents and the dominant group (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999). The work of Phelan et al. (1998) suggests that all students continually negotiate and act upon the borders between their multiple worlds, and that the most successful are those who are able to make smooth transitions and to transform borders into manageable boundaries (Phelan et al., 1998). Several of the students in the study indicated that they are continually "negotiating identities" (Cummins, 1996). This is perhaps most evident when one student confided that how he describes himself at any time depends upon the situation he is in.

The students spoke of mixing their cultures as a means to help them cope and succeed in their new worlds. Like the successful Iranian immigrant students in Hoffman's (1988) study, they mentioned that taking the good from each culture was valuable to them. One student did suggest that this transformation in identity was problematic to parental relationships, hinting that living in different worlds and constantly having to negotiate one's identity in different settings is not as effortless as the student participants make it seem. Help with the process would seem invaluable. As noted earlier immigrant parents may not be in the best position to offer such help (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Teachers who are able to play the role of cultural accommodators and mediators would thus seem, as Nieto (1999, 2000) asserts, fundamental to promoting student learning.

Rather than viewing cultural diversity as a deficit, the bicultural developmental approach recognizes the abilities and skills of bicultural students. As was evident from recent research (For example, Cummins, 1996; Phelan et al., 1998), and confirmed by the findings of this study, students who are able to live in multiple worlds and cross borders are often successful students. Conversely, it can also be said that successful students are those that thrive in different cultures. Talents and strengths which they have acquired in the development of their own unique cultural identity may include cross-cultural communication skills, observational skills, social skills, linguistic skills, in addition to characteristics and values which may include adaptability, tolerance, and respect (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999).

The bicultural developmental approach thus allows educators to celebrate the unique assets which bicultural students may possess, and to use them to increase these students' academic performance.

## **B. Other Variables**

It is clear that no one theory or approach accounts for the academic achievement of culturally diverse students and that a more comprehensive view is required. There are many variables which have been linked to the academic success or failure of students. An analysis of the ones that the student participants identified as most important are included below. It is important to note that the literature review revealed there is much interplay amongst the variables related to the academic achievement of culturally diverse students. Where possible such relationships are pointed out, but given the design and limitations of this study it is not possible to examine these relationships in depth. It is hoped that the reader can keep the complexity of the topic at the forefront of his or her mind as this analysis of variables is presented.

### **1. Language**

The finding that student participants spoke more about language than they did about any other issue and that it was identified by the majority of them as the greatest barrier they faced is consistent with other research focusing on what culturally diverse students themselves have to say about their educational experiences (For example, Anderson, 2002; Watt, Roessingh, & Bosetti, 1996; Tanners, 1997). The view that language presents the major barrier to participation and success was also shared by the parents in the study. Although teachers in the study recognized the barrier that lack of English can present to students, they did not place emphasis on this point. This could indicate that the teachers may not realize just how much of an impact lack of English is having on some newcomer students. It could also be argued, however, that perhaps it has less impact on student achievement than what the students and parents perceive it to have.

Much of the theory and research suggests that the longer one lives in an English speaking country, the more adequate one feels they are and/or becomes with this language (For example, Anderson, 2002; Cummins, 1984). The findings of this study suggest that it may be considerably more complex than this. One of the student participants had just recently arrived (6 months) and she felt good about her level of English. This is a case where

socioeconomic status is likely to play a large role in that this student indicated that she had had private English lessons before coming to Canada. The majority of newcomers immigrants would not have had this opportunity. Another student who had been in Canada for 16 months reported that his English was deteriorating, as he was spending more time with Farsi-speaking friends.

The overwhelming majority of the students, parents, and teachers agreed that students should not be using Farsi in school, and Iranian students were observed to generally limit the use of their home language to the hallways between classes. They are thus at odds with the notion that the use of heritage language in one's school increases students' chances of success, which the findings of some studies have suggested (Cummins, 1993). Also, despite the fact that the school where the study took place is bilingual (English and French), no student, parent, or teacher spoke of the value and benefits of having two languages. It would appear that much could be done in the school to recognize and honour this ability, particularly in light of research which finds bilingualism to be a positive force in children's cognitive development (Sylwester, 2003) and academic performance (Cummins, 1984).

All but one of the students, and all of the parent and teacher participants indicated that they felt it was beneficial for families to come to Canada when the children are young so that English is easier for them to learn. There was one student who felt it was better for Iranian students to come to Canada when they have their first language intact, consistent with recent research indicating that students who have good knowledge structure of their home language are better equipped to learn a second language (Cummins, 2001).

Maintenance of first language in the home aids in providing the knowledge structure allowing students to better learn English and thus to facilitate their success in their new schools (Cummins, 1996). All the students in the current study, regardless of the time spent in Canada, reported that it was primarily Farsi used in their homes. It is thus likely that the use of Farsi in the homes of the student participants has played at least some part in their English language acquisition and their school success.

Teacher participants in the study were concerned that parents and students fail to realize that it takes time to learn the language with the skill to function at higher grade levels academically, as research and literature suggests (Cummins, 1984). They were concerned that there seemed to be a trend for families to come when the children were older, and they felt that the younger the student upon age of arrival the easier it would be for her or him to learn English. This conflicts with some newer research suggesting that older immigrant

students have a stronger cognitive and academic foundation that facilitates the acquisition of English and supports the learning of grade appropriate content knowledge in English (Cummins, 2001). Teachers at the bilingual school may thus benefit from keeping up with the research involving linguistically diverse students so that they can better understand and help their many bilingual students.

Research does show that learning language and becoming literate is a long and complex process and should not be rushed (Alvarez, Barton, Clark, Keenan, Lalyre, MacNeill, & O'Brien, 1992). The findings from this study indicate that although the students and their parents are intensely aware of the difficulties of learning a new language and that they feel that this has a great impact on school performance, they may not be prepared to readily accept the amount of time the process has been shown to take. This is consistent with Gunderson's (2004) recent study of immigrant children in the Vancouver School system.

## **2. Family**

Besides language, research and literature on a number of other familial factors which have also been linked to academic achievement were presented in the literature review. It was suggested that until recently there has been no distinction between cultural diversity and poverty (Barrera, 1995). The findings of this study confirm that this distinction must be made. The description of the community and school where the study takes place indicates that the student participants are from at least mid socioeconomic status, and that most would be in a very high level.

Research indicates that generally the higher the student's socioeconomic status, the more successful they are in school (For example, Marcon, 1999; Gunderson, 2004). The high socioeconomic status of the students in this study is thus likely a factor in their success. The nature of this relationship is, however, unclear given the design of the study. It is also very important to note that there are students with Persian backgrounds at the school who are struggling, and thus it is not possible that socioeconomic status is a determining factor of school success, which is a claim made by Gunderson (2004) in his study of youths from various ethnic groups in Vancouver schools.

None of the students or their parents mentioned socioeconomic status as a factor relating to student success. Several students did, however, identify the importance of parent education level and tied that to academic performance. Parents had indicated that they

placed great value on education, consistent with the characteristic of voluntary immigrants (Ogbu, 1987).

The students discussed the role of religion in their lives. There were varying degrees to which the students indicated they adhered to beliefs and practices. The majority seemed concerned that they were not viewed as “religious”, and none visibly displayed any level of religious commitment. This is likely tied to the notion of “Islamophobia”, which will be discussed in more detail below (See **Racism** section). Although the students did not identify religion as a factor for their own success in school, most of them mentioned that the more religious a Persian family, the more likely that the children were to study and receive good grades, as has been found in the few studies available on religious commitment and academic achievement (For example Ahmad, 2001; Jeynes, 1999). The students generally indicated and displayed a high tolerance and respect for students who were strongly religious, and while there appears to be no research and/or literature on the relationship of such traits on school performance, it may be possible that this openness is a positive factor in their learning.

Ogbu (1987, 1993) maintains that voluntary immigrants have a strong belief in the value of education and have high expectations for their children to do well in school. The parents in the current study indicated that they had high expectations for their children. The student participants also reported that their parents had high expectations for them, and they also indicated that they had high self expectations. This reinforces the finding from other research which show parental perceptions of education are most often adopted by their children (For example, Ford, 1993; Gibson, 1988; Matute-Bianchi, 1991; Okagaki et al., 1996). The findings of the current study are also consistent with research indicating that high parental expectations are often related to high student achievement (For example, Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Okagaki et al., 1995; Rong, 1998).

Two of the student participants made comments indicating they felt a huge amount of parental pressure to do well. This is consistent with the study conducted by Phelan, Yu and Davidson (1992), which found students most frequently cited family stress was parental pressure to do well in school.

Pressure on students to do well in school can lead to cheating. Cheating has been identified as a problem in two studies on high achieving culturally diverse students (Cordeiro & Carspecken, 1993; Hemmings, 1996). As in the study by Hoffman (1988), teachers at the school expressed concern about what they felt was a widespread practice of cheating

amongst Iranian students. Unlike the students in Hoffman's study, however, the students in the current study did not admit to any practices which could be considered cheating, and no such observations were made (with one exception previously noted). This does not presuppose that cheating is not an issue for the students in the current study. The students may have chosen not to divulge possible experiences around this sensitive issue to the researcher for reasons discussed as limitations of the research, including that the students may have felt the researcher to be an authority figure to whom disclosing such information may get them into trouble.

Furthermore, in Hoffman's (1988) study a difference in perceptions of cheating was found amongst Iranian students and their American classmates. The teachers in the current study also reported that this may be the case in their school as well. However, no such difference was found in the current study, and the parents indicated that they and their children viewed cheating as immoral. A more in-depth look at the perceptions and practices of cheating in the school would be useful to help the educators better define the problem and to determine means to minimize cheating.

Cultural incompatibilities theory suggests that misunderstandings between the home and school are more likely in culturally diverse families and that this has a negative impact on students' academic achievement levels (McLaughlin, 1992; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998; Portes, 1996). Parents involved in the study indicated that they very much wanted information about the school. For several parents what seemed to have been a primary motivation for them wanting their children to participate in the study was that they hoped to gain such information. Despite the researcher explaining that understanding of the school that they could gain from participating in the study may be minimal, the parents seemed pleased to have any sort of connection with an event being conducted within the school. They asked for and were given regular focus group discussions, thus increasing their amount of participation from the initial research plan. They also expressed interest in continuing such discussions in the future. It is very likely that their desire to know as much as possible about the school is related to their children's success, consistent with the results of other research (For example, Delgado-Gaitan, 1992).

Not only did their parents want to know about their children's lives in school, the children also expressed concern about their parent's lives. This is consistent with Hoffman's (1988) assertion that there is a strong family orientation amongst Iranians. The students stressed the loneliness and feeling of isolation they felt their parents, particularly their

mothers, were facing. They pointed out that mothers coming from Iran may feel unable to help their children in a new country where they do not understand the language or the school system. They felt that if more mothers were able to be more involved in the school their children would perhaps display less inappropriate behaviour at school and would have higher achievement.

Half of the student participants reported that their fathers were away a lot of the time, most being out of the country. Those whose fathers were at home also brought up the point that many fathers in families with Iranian backgrounds are missing from the home much of the time. They indicated that they could not rely on help with their schoolwork from their father.

The students attributed both mothers' feelings of isolation and loneliness and their fathers' absenteeism to some students' feeling of a lack of attention and a sense of loneliness. They suggested that these feelings could be factors in misbehaviour and poor academic performance. As pointed out in the literature review, there are few studies in these areas. It would be interesting if more research in this area could be carried out with other culturally diverse student groups to see if these are concerns more specific to students with Iranian backgrounds than to others.

Research indicates that culturally diverse families treat their boys and girls very differently (Valenzuela, 1999; Waters, 1997; Smith, 1999; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001) and that immigrant girls outperform immigrant boys (Fuligni, 1997; Kao & Tienda, 1995). Both the males and females in this study were successful students and all had high aspirations. Furthermore, parents of both males and females also indicated they had high aspirations for their children. They gave no evidence that they had considered their children's gender in their hopes for his or her future. More research would be useful to determine whether previous research findings regarding gender and school achievement apply to students with Iranian backgrounds.

### **3. Peers**

Consistent with literature and research highlighting the important role of peers in the academic achievement of adolescents (For example Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001), the students in this study also identified them as an important factor. This finding may also serve to confirm Fuligni's (1997) assertion that peers

may be especially important for students from immigrant families. The students in this study generally described their friends as helpful to their school performance.

Consistent with other research (Hoffman, 1988; Phelan, Davidson & Cao, 1992), the majority of the students in this study pointed out that the Persian students tended to stick together at the school, and this was confirmed by observations. Most also indicated that they themselves generally hung out with other Persian students. Several of the students indicated that this was actually a mixed blessing. Several students pointed out the negative effects of this segregation, primarily including decreased opportunity for improving English.

The students in the study all indicated that their Persian background was important to them and most often used it in their self-descriptions. They thus did not explicitly exhibit the “raceless” or “acting white” phenomenon which Fordham (1988) found linked to school success. There was no indication that the students were resisting this phenomenon, either, aside from their tendency to hang out with other Persians. This is not surprising since the research indicates that this phenomenon is most common in underachieving students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). The successful Hispanic students in Cordeiro and Carspecken’s (1993) study also did not experience “the burden of acting white” (p.289).

One male student did, however, indicate that he would describe himself differently depending upon the situation he was in. Furthermore, as previously discussed, several of the students indicated that they combined aspects of both Iranian and Canadian cultures in their own identity. These findings thus could lend support for the more newly emerging approaches to the study of academic achievement in culturally diverse students including bicultural development and negotiation theory. The findings of this study were consistent with those of Phelan et al. (1998) who found that there seems to be more fluid movement between boundaries for culturally diverse students who had been in school longer. Those students who had been in Canada longer tended to report that their friends came from a greater diversity of cultural backgrounds, and were observed to have a more diverse group of friends. Furthermore, students in another study undertaken by Phelan et al. (1992) described the ease with which they could traverse group boundaries as significant to their overall feeling of well-being. Similarly, the students in the present study who reported having a mixture of friends seemed very confident. The male student who felt he was not comfortable talking to “Canadian friends” reported feeling different and “lacking something”. While these findings support the notion of a relationship between diversity of friendships and self-esteem, they cannot determine the nature of this relationship.

None of the student participants brought up the impact of negative peer pressure on academic performance, despite the importance it is granted in the literature and research. It may be that these successful students have learned how to avoid and resist negative peer pressure, which research has shown successful students tend to do (Phelan et al., 1994; Cummins, 1996). Strategies that these students may use to do so would be a valuable study for parents and educators concerned with the increasing number of first generation Iranian-Canadian youths involved in gang and crime related activity (Vancouver Sun, April 14, 2004).

Involvement in extra-curricular activities has been identified as one preventive strategy for discouraging less productive activities. The students in this study did agree that participating in extra-curricular activities seemed beneficial; however, most of their own participation in such activities was not at all or limited. This may in part be due to the suggestion of Phelan et al. (1998) that strategies to involve students in extra-curricular activities are often those most familiar and comfortable to mainstream youth. Parent and teacher participants also thought that encouraging extra-curricular activities was helpful for new students.

#### **4. School**

##### **i. Teachers**

Almost all the student participants indicated that they found their teachers, the school counsellors, and the administrators approachable and helpful, and they and their Iranian peers and parents were observed using these services. This is consistent with the abundance of research and literature indicating the high importance of caring teachers to the academic success of their culturally diverse students (Codjoe, 2001; Howard, 2001; Phelan et al., 1998; Tanners, 1997).

There were only two educators at the school observed to be of Iranian background. Most of the student participants indicated that they thought it would be helpful if there were more Iranian teachers at the school. This is also consistent with research indicating the benefits of ethnic role models for culturally diverse students (Codjoe, 2001; Zirkel, 2002). The teachers themselves also indicated that they would like more teachers with Iranian backgrounds at the school so that they could learn more from them about the Persian students.

Most of the student participants also indicated that if their teachers had a better understanding of Persian culture it would be very helpful. This is also consistent with the research which has found that those teachers who strive to understand their students' lives are much more capable of leading them to academic success (Howard, 2001; Jasmine, 1995; Saracho & Spodek, 1995; Schlosser, 1992; Tharp, 1989). The teachers in the study also indicated that they would like to learn more about the culture of their Persian students. Observations suggested that misunderstandings were occurring. One of the previously provided examples of this included some teachers thinking that the Iranian students spoke Arabic. It was clear that a greater teacher understanding of the Persian culture would be beneficial to student/teacher relationships.

One student in the study advocated for the "colour-blind" approach when he stated that he felt that gaining an understanding of Persian culture should not be necessary for teachers. Although it could be due to a number of factors including time constraints, the small number of teachers who did attend focus group discussions may also give some indication that the majority may prefer to view and treat all students the same and see no reason to consider their student's ethnicity. This approach was described in the literature review as being detrimental to student success, and thus efforts at the school level to acknowledge and affirm cultural differences would likely contribute to a more positive learning environment.

## **ii. Classes**

Despite research indicating immigrant students who are to become successful in school require tacit knowledge about the school, classes, credits, graduation requirements, etc. as soon as possible (Sternberg, 1990; Watt, Roessingh, & Bosetti, 1996), the majority of the student participants did not indicate any concern with acquiring such information. This is in contrast to Anderson's (2002) research, in which he concluded a need for a "reception class" in which immigrant students could receive this needed information. It could be that the school where the study took place is getting the needed information out to new students in an adequate manner. However, the parents did identify home-school communication as necessary to student success, and they felt that the school could do more to better this communication. Similarly, teachers also felt the need for greater home-school communication, especially for newcomer students. The teachers seemed to agree that more could be done by the school to increase this communication; they also pointed out, however, that parents also need to make an effort to be more involved. A counsellor pointed out to the

teachers that there was a procedure in place for newcomer students and their parents, which the teachers did not seem to be aware of. This points out the need not only for increased level of home-school communication, but also for communication at the school level amongst counsellors, teachers, and administrators about services for new students.

There was the perception by many of the student participants that students coming from Iran were often held back or put in lower level classes than they should be. Several of the student participants felt that they had experienced this first hand. That two of the more recent arrivals were happy with their placements, however, gives some indication that the students' perceptions may not match the reality of what takes place at the school. The parents generally seemed happy with their own child's grade/class placement when they had arrived.

Most of the student participants had had at least one English-as-a second language class and all of them reported that these classes were helpful. The students were, however, not as positive about the helpfulness of transition classes. Several who had been put into such classes indicated they thought they would be better off in regular classes. The parents also questioned the value of transition classes. This is consistent with the findings of Anderson's (2002) study. It may also suggest a lack of awareness or understanding of the different requirements needed for conversational proficiency and for academic proficiency (Cummins, 1984). The teacher participants, however, felt that the transition classes may not be enough to offer English as a Second Language students. This student and parent/teacher discrepancy in perceptions of transition classes suggests that it is an area requiring further examination at the school level.

Three of the eight student participants had had learning assistance classes, which would support the research indicating that there is a disproportionate representation of ethnic minority students in special education (Cummins, 1991a; Lidz, 2001; Rice and Ortiz, 1994).

None of the students discussed curriculum or textbooks as being of importance in their academic success or difficulties, despite the recent emphasis on the use of multiculturally sensitive materials and curriculum (Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001). This fits in with the general sense of happiness and satisfaction that the students displayed towards the mainstream culture, and their acceptance of many aspects of it in the development of their new bicultural identities.

### **iii. School Differences**

The majority of students indicated that they thought classes in Iran are more advanced than the ones in their current school. In general most stated that they found the classes in their current school easier than those they had been in or had heard about in Iran. The parents also felt that the educational system in Iran is superior and more encouraging of high student achievement than the one in Canada. These findings contrast with the majority of studies of immigrant students which indicate that many of them do not feel adequately prepared in their home countries for the schoolwork that they are being given here (Tanners, 1997). These findings further indicate that Iranian-Canadians do not possess all of the characteristics of voluntary minorities and lend more support to the criticism that Ogbu's (1993) typology is too dichotomous (For example, Gibson, 1997). They suggest that educators may need to look closely at the country of origin of individual immigrant students in their placement procedures.

The majority of studies have also found that many immigrant students are used to more structure and discipline than is provided in their new schools (Tanners, 1997). The majority of the students and parents in the current study also indicated their perceptions that teachers in Iran are stricter and more formal than those in Canada. Both groups also suggested this as a factor in misconduct in Iranian students.

Several students in the current study also attributed lower class levels as contributing to boredom and misbehaviour of many students coming from Iran to a Canadian school. The majority also indicated that with the different structure and teacher attitudes, students coming from Iran experience a newfound freedom. Confusion over how to handle this newfound freedom was very prominent in the discussions of both student and parent participants, and was also brought up by teacher participants. From the literature review it is evident that there is a lack of research into this experience. Tanners (1997) attempted to explain this process in her study of immigrant students in New York City schools, but other studies which can add information to this phenomenon are required.

Current research such as Tanners (1997), has found that the more immigrant students are exposed to American life, the more likely they are to engage in misbehaviour and the more likely their educational aspirations will fall. In contrast, the students, parents, and teachers in the current study all indicated that misbehaviour amongst students from Iran was primarily evident in recent arrivals. In order to determine whether the participants' perceptions meet the reality of what is actually happening at the school, or whether recent

research findings may not apply to those with Iranian backgrounds, further research is needed.

While little information is available on high achieving culturally diverse students, Tanners (1997) found that such students have often come to their new school with a strong desire to learn and are angered and frustrated by students who they feel are distracting them. Several students in the current study expressed similar sentiments towards Iranian students who were acting out. A sense of embarrassment was also expressed by one student and this seemed to be shared by parent participants.

One student participant referred to community differences which he felt affected student behaviour. He suggested that life in Iran is far more exciting and with the many people one never gets bored. He felt a need for clubs and activities for Iranian students to keep them from becoming bored and getting into trouble. One student in Anderson's (2002) study described similar sentiments when he compared the social life in the country where he came from to his social life in Canada. This suggests that communities which consider the needs of their youth in their planning may experience fewer problems with this population.

## **5. Racism**

As previously mentioned, none of the students indicated problems with the curriculum, despite the fact that such factors as textbooks and testing and grouping practices have been established as major barriers to educational achievement and equality (King, 1993). The students were thus either unaware of the bias against them in these regards, or accepting of the curriculum of their new school as they were with other aspects of the mainstream culture.

The literature review indicated that children who perceive barriers to their success because of their ethnicity may be less engaged in school and less accepting of school as an arena in which they can or should excel (Alladin, 1996; Codjoe, 2001; Okagaki, Frensch, & Dodson, 1996). Most of the students in the current study suggested that there was no discrimination on the part of teachers at the school towards students with Iranian backgrounds. This perception may thus be related to their success. However, given that these students also were able to give one or two examples of such discrimination that they had witnessed toward others, it may also indicate a tendency towards the colour-blind approach discussed in the literature review (Banks and Banks, 2001; Darder, 1991).

In addition to many of the students providing an example of racism and/or discrimination, one student felt that there was a good deal of teacher discrimination towards

students with Iranian backgrounds. The parents and teachers did not perceive a problem with this at the school. The teachers did suggest, however, that students with Iranian backgrounds were “quick to play the racism card” when things were not going their way. It would thus appear that this is an area requiring further investigation in the school.

Most of the student participants reported feeling a good deal of stereotyping of Iranians occurs, although perhaps more so in the community than at the school. This is consistent with the feelings of the black students in Alberta undertaken by Codjoe (2001). They felt that negative societal labeling and stereotyping were barriers to their achieving success in school. The student participants in the current study were concerned that teachers think that all Persians are the same and base this on the behaviour of the “bad” students. The student who wanted to avoid being known as Persian at times could have been trying to avoid this stereotyping.

The fact that many of the students adhered to many Muslim practices and beliefs, yet did not visibly display this adherence and did not want to be viewed as “religious” may also suggest that they are hoping to avoid being victims of “Islamophobia”. Thus, many of the aspects of the stereotype threat theory (Steele, 1997) appear to apply to the Iranian students in the current study.

It was reported in the findings that the students felt that some Persians may be prejudiced towards other Persians. The participants themselves indicated a sense of anger, frustration, and embarrassment towards some Iranian students. This could possibly be attributed to the stereotype threat theory, as those whom the discrimination is directed towards may be more openly displaying aspects of the stereotype of the Persian student that those directing it may be wishing to avoid.

The students pointed out that stereotyping was prevalent in the media, particularly since September 11, 2001. This is consistent with other research (Ahmad, 2001), and reinforces the need for educators to be sensitive to the stresses faced by certain groups of students, including those with Iranian backgrounds, as suggested by the National Association of School Psychologists (2002).

There was no direct evidence that the students in the study were experiencing an “Islamic-re-assertion”, as Ahmad (2001) asserts has been particularly prevalent amongst Muslim youth and students. The students did, however, state their tolerance and respect for those students in their school who did exhibit a more religious persona, which may be a mild form of this re-assertion.

The students did not mention as much concern with the media portrayal of Iranian women. This runs contrary to the research which indicates the media presents a negative stereotype of Muslim women as being oppressed and not encouraged into higher education (Ahmad, 2001; Hoodfar, 1993; Said, 1981). One student did, however, feel that it was unfair that when showing Iranian aspects the media most often showed the women dressed in black. Other than this the female students and parents in the study gave no indication that they felt stifled by the media based on their sex.

### **C. Chapter Summary and Looking Ahead**

This analysis revealed support both for and against aspects of different approaches to the academic achievement of culturally diverse students. Findings were also analyzed according to research and literature on other variables linked to this. The next chapter begins with a summary and critique of the research carried out. General conclusions and new directions for further research which were reached from this analysis are then presented. The last section draws on the discussion in this chapter and formulates recommendations for improving the academic achievement of students with Iranian backgrounds and other students with culturally diverse backgrounds.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### A. A Study Review: What, Why and How

This study examined the perceptions of first generation immigrants with Iranian backgrounds attending a secondary school in one of the wealthiest areas in Canada regarding academic achievement. This is an important study for a number of reasons. The face of many Canadian schools has rapidly changed from being white European to a multitude of colours and cultures. The increasing amount of literature on multicultural education and the development of teacher education classes aimed at culturally responsive teaching indicates ethnic diversity in our nation's schools is regarded as a critical factor in academic achievement. A greater understanding of the dynamics of this relationship is required.

What is missing from many of the approaches to the academic achievement of culturally diverse students is the perspectives of students themselves. The value of these perspectives has only recently begun to be discovered, and has been particularly useful in the development of newer approaches. Also, by listening to students' voices and hearing their experiences, teachers might be more willing to rethink their pedagogical practices. Furthermore, school reform which considers students' viewpoints, perceptions, and interpretations of schooling has been found to be most effective (Nieto, 1999, 2000; Phelan et al., 1998).

Because culturally diverse students have been found to be more likely to experience academic failure (Banks & Banks, 2001; Nieto, 2000), the focus of much of the research and theory has been on groups of students having difficulties in school. Researchers have been stating the need to extend the focus beyond school failure in order to better understand the dynamics of educational achievement amongst culturally diverse students. Much of the theory and research also fails to address students other than those from a low socioeconomic status. Studies which include successful culturally diverse students from a mid to high socioeconomic background are required.

One group for which there is very little information is those with Iranian background. It has been suggested that Iranians do not fit the typical ethnic minority image (Sabagh & Bozorg-Mehr, 1987), and that they are the least-well-known of all American minorities (Lorenz & Wertime, 1980). An extensive literature review identified only two North

American studies involving Iranian students' schooling experiences (Hoffman, 1988 and Zadeh, 2001). There is a relatively large percentage of Iranian students in the community where the study takes place, and educators within this school district may thus find information about some of these students particularly useful.

It was also suggested that students with Iranian backgrounds may perceive themselves to be victims of racism and discrimination in light of world events, most notably those of September 11, 2001. Students who perceive barriers to their academic success based on their ethnicity are more likely to perform poorly in school (Codjoe, 2001; LaFromboise et al., 1998). It is necessary for educators to know if their students feel such limitations if they wish to work to combat racism in their schools.

These needs, as well as personal motives discussed in the preface, helped define the design of the study. Elements of both micro- and macro-ethnography, as well as other types of qualitative research, were used. Data was gathered primarily through interviews, as well as with focus groups, observation, and document analysis. Findings were presented primarily in the words of the students themselves. They were analyzed contextually and in conjunction with data gathered from the students' parents and educators at their school. Before the general conclusions and recommendations and areas requiring further research are discussed, however, the study's limitations must be noted.

## **B. Evaluation and Limitations of the Research**

A random sample of students with Iranian background from the secondary school was initially sought for this study in order to include a wide range of experiences. However, school district permission for the study would only be granted if prospective parent participants responded to a public invitation. As noted, it was thought that this was a factor in the student participants all being identified as successful. While this limits the inclusion of experiences from a wider range of students, it is this group of students which the literature review indicated there was a great need for information from.

The researcher strived to provide a thorough description of the participant students. As noted they could all be described as successful students. They were all first generation immigrants. All came from at least a mid socioeconomic status, and most from a high level. They included a fairly equal number of males and females and there was a wide range of grade level represented. With the descriptions of the students, as well as of the community and the school where the study took place, the question of how applicable the findings are to

other Iranian and/or other culturally diverse students in Canada is primarily left up to the reader to determine. While the generalizability of the findings may be limited, it is stressed that the researcher attempted to present the participants not as a sample, but as examples of students with Iranian backgrounds. More examples and an inclusion of students from other contexts would be required in any attempt to understand a broad “Iranian Canadian schooling experience”.

The design of this study allowed the researcher to include a relatively small number of students with many commonalities as discussed above. There is a danger in such studies to pigeonhole people and to encourage preconceptions and biases. While the small number of student participants limits the degree of variance in the findings, the researcher strove to include negative instances and in-group variance whenever possible. This was done in order to avoid stereotypes from emerging. The instances and variance indicate a huge degree of diversity is present in Iranian families in Canada, and challenge any assumption that they could fit into one mold. Thus it is hoped that this study avoids the criticism of other similarly designed studies and aids in the fight against stereotypical thinking.

Another danger given the design of the study is a tendency to simplify the analysis. The emerging themes are presented singularly, which could suggest that they are constant, unchanging, stable variables with no interconnection. The researcher thus tried to point out variables which may be related, although she made no attempt to determine the exact nature of such relationships and stressed that the design of the study renders it unable to conclude any causations. It is hoped that the reader can recognize from the study the complex, dynamic interplay of variables involved in the academic achievement of the student participants.

An important consideration in an evaluation of the research is how truthful the findings of the study are. A large part of the data gathered for this study consisted of students’ self-perceptions. While self-perceptions have been found to play a critical role in student achievement, there is the question of how closely they match reality. To help in this determination different modes of data collection were used, including interviews, observation and documents. Data source triangulation was also used by the inclusion of the students’ parents’ and teachers’ perspectives. Noting where possible how the students’ interpretations matched the views of those around them enhances the trustworthiness of the study.

Another consideration in the evaluation of the trustworthiness of the study is how sure one can reasonably be that the findings would be replicated if the study were conducted with

the same participants in the same context. The researcher met with each of the student participants after their interviews were completed and allowed them to react to a summary of their interview(s), and encouraged them to edit and add as they saw fit. They were also presented with an initial analysis of the findings and asked to provide feedback to this information. Parents and teachers were also presented with multiple opportunities to clarify, correct and add to the findings.

Lastly, there is the concern with the type of research presented that the findings are reflective of the subjects and the inquiry itself rather than a product of the researcher's biases or prejudices. The researcher tried to minimize such negative effects in a number of ways, most importantly by gathering data in different ways and from different sources, and by continually asking questions of it. Furthermore, she identified points in her background which may help minimize biases and/or prejudices. She does, however, acknowledge that it is inevitable that some her background has biased the findings. This is a limitation by which all qualitative research must be evaluated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **C. General Conclusions – Original Knowledge**

Response to the initial invitation to parents with Iranian backgrounds to have their children take part in a study examining academic achievement indicated the existence of a group of parents who were very interested in such a study. Those parents responding seem honoured and encouraged that an educator was interested in students with their family background. These parents' children also seemed eager to talk about their views on schooling and anxious to suggest ways to make it a better and more rewarding experience for themselves and other students with Iranian backgrounds. Although only a small number of educators at the school chose to participate in the study, those who did indicated their belief in the importance of examining this issue. Thus, one most obvious outcome of this study was the identification of a high level of concern about the experiences of Iranian students at the school.

Of the initial eleven parents and students wanting to take part in the study, two families moved to the United States and one went to Iran on vacation and did not return to the school. This may support the notion that Iranians may be less committed to their new life in Canada than immigrants from other countries. The feeling of a lack of stability or permanence has been shown to affect the school experiences of students from migrant farmworker families (Martinez, Scott, Cranston-Gingras & Platt, 1994) and of Yemeni American high school

students (Sarroub, 2001). That some Iranian students may also be experiencing this feeling is valuable for their educators to know. Adolescence can be an unsettling time for many students, and it is important that educators realize added challenges which may be present for some of their Iranian students.

The student and parent participants reflected a good deal of diversity amongst Iranians in Canada, even within a group sharing many commonalities. This serves to dispel stereotypical thinking. Even with this diversity, however, the major issues which they brought up were much the same. Furthermore, in general the students and parents identified the same factors as being important to the academic achievement of students with Iranian backgrounds. In addition to this, these factors were also brought up by the teachers. There is often an assumption that students' perspectives are at odds with those of their teachers and parents. Another common assumption is that teachers hold different views on schooling than culturally diverse parents and children. Knowing that these perspectives may actually be similar in many ways indicates that students and parents could be treated as co-developers of an optimal learning environment within the school.

The students themselves are testimony to the fact that there are very successful Iranian students at the school. These students in general did not perceive barriers to their success because of their ethnicity, and they seemed to feel good about themselves and their school. Their hopes for university or another form of higher learning gives indication that they believe that they are capable and worthy of the very best education. The teachers also acknowledged the success of their Iranian students in general. Despite this, student, parent, and teacher participants all tended to focus discussions on unsuccessful and/or misbehaving Iranian students. The existence of this group of students would thus seem to be a reality, and one in which they are all interested in helping.

### **1. Theory and Approaches**

The findings of this study confirmed criticisms in each of the primary theories or approaches to the academic achievement of culturally diverse students. That each of the eight student participants in the study could be described as successful in school serves to further discredit genetic and cultural deprivation theories. The findings confirm that ethnicity does not presuppose underachievement. Economic and social reproduction theories also focus on the failure of minority students. The Iranian students, their school and their

community described in this study suggest that there must be a distinction made between cultural diversity and poverty.

The primary criticism of the secondary cultural discontinuity theory is that the typology is too dichotomous. Results of this study support this criticism. These Iranians seemed to best fit into the “voluntary immigrant” group described by Ogbu (1987, 1993, 1995), in that they had come to Canada on their own free will. Many also stated they came primarily for their children’s education. They seemed to hold a folk theory of school success, believing they could get ahead through education and hard work. This has been found in previous research (Hoffman, 1988), and in the current study.

There were, however, important aspects of this theory which were not supported by the findings of the current study. Ogbu (1987, 1993, 1995) asserts that members of a particular cultural group share the same characteristics. The literature review indicated Iranians are an extremely heterogeneous population in terms of religion, ethnicity, and politics. Furthermore, though they had come to Canada on their own free will, many of the participants stated their desire to return to Iran when the political situation there stabilized. As previously discussed, the findings also indicate that some Iranian immigrants may be less committed to life in their new country than immigrants from other countries. They also did not feel that they were receiving a superior education than what they would be receiving in Iran. These latter findings may challenge some to rethink some commonly held beliefs and notions about immigrants in Canada. They may not all be as happy and/or as satisfied to be in their new land as some may think. Furthermore, the idea that some may view the education in other non-western countries as superior in some ways may surprise some educators and perhaps inspire them to reflect on different ideas of what education is for and about.

Findings of the current study also supported criticism of cultural incompatibilities theory. The primary criticism is that it assumes that cultural differences between home and school necessarily create difficulties and problems. The successful students in the current study are testament to the fact that such differences do not necessarily lead to negative outcomes.

Although resistance theory primarily applies to students performing poorly in school, the findings of this study do seem in line with recent research challenging some of its notions. This research indicates that students resisting assimilation may actually be among the most successful students (Nieto, 2000). The successful students in this study did not

indicate that they were resisting assimilation, although they did indicate that they felt it important to maintain some of their culture.

The fact that the student participants spoke of taking the good from both their Iranian culture and the culture they are encountering in their new country supports the newer bicultural developmental or negotiation approach to the study of culturally diverse students. This approach speaks to the challenges these students face, and the importance of having educators within the school who can help them with this process. The skills required from students in this process and the values which they may develop can be positive, and many would benefit their academic achievement. This approach thus allows for a positive, student-centered view of academic achievement. Thus, according to this approach, the perceptions of students are most valuable in educator attempts to better understand and help them. Those of the students in the current study are summarized briefly below.

## **2. Language**

Consistent with research on immigrants from other countries, both the student and parent participants with Iranian backgrounds in this study indicated that the biggest concern is overcoming language barriers. The teacher participants also indicated that language was a big concern for their Iranian students. While they all spoke of the challenges of learning a new language, none of the participants in the study spoke of the benefits of having two languages. Thus there seemed to be a need for everyone to recognize the value of having more than one language, particularly in a bilingual (English/French) school.

The vast majority of the students, parents, and teachers seemed to equate the more time spent in the country with a higher level of English. However, the experiences of the students themselves indicate that this is a faulty assumption for some Iranian students. Some students coming from Iran may be very proficient in English and, depending on their circumstances here, some may actually speak more Farsi. Socioeconomic status and peer group affiliation were suggested as possible factors.

The students spoke of the value of English as a Second Language classes for newcomer Iranian students. They did not, however, see the value of transition classes. Although they stressed the difficulties of learning a new language, there was indication that they and their parents may not be prepared to acknowledge the length and complexity of the process. This was also a primary finding in a recent study of new immigrants to Vancouver schools

(Gunderson, 2004), indicating that this problem extends beyond the school where the study took place.

Farsi was primarily used in the homes of each of the student participants in the study. Based on research, this is likely one factor in their success. Research also indicates the benefits of using heritage language in schools (Cummins, 1996). However, the students, parents, and teachers in this study were unanimous in their feeling that Farsi should not be used at the school. Most also felt that it is beneficial for families coming from Iran to Canada to do so when the children are as young as possible. This also conflicts with research offering evidence that older immigrant students in Canada who receive more years of schooling in their native language do better in school (Cummins, 2001). These latter findings point to a need for more education on second language acquisition. A greater understanding of this process seems especially critical for educators in today's diverse classrooms.

### **3. Family**

The students acknowledged many familial factors which they felt affected the academic achievement of Iranian students. They spoke of the high expectations that their parents had for them, and of their own high expectations. The parents also indicated that they had high expectations for their children. Some of the students indicated the high degree of pressure this places upon them, something that needs to be considered in any study of successful students. The students also spoke of parent education level. They indicated that they felt that the more religious an Iranian family, the greater the chances that the children would be doing well in school, an assumption which some studies support (For example, Jeynes, 1999; Koubek, 1984). They indicated a respect for students who were very religious, and it was thought that their openness and tolerance may be a positive factor in their learning. They spoke of their mother's isolation and loneliness, students' own loneliness and lack of attention, and fathers' absences as playing a role in the misbehaviour and poor academic performance of some Iranian students. There was indication that these factors may affect Iranian students more than students from other countries because of a strong family orientation and the tendency for Iranian immigrant fathers to be away from the family for long periods of time.

None of the students brought up two factors which have been closely linked to academic achievement levels. They did not discuss socioeconomic status, although a few did bring up parent education level as a factor in academic performance. None of the student or

parent participants brought up gender, which has been found to significantly affect the way parents bring up their children and to impact school performance (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). This is particularly interesting given some studies which suggest that gender is a particularly important factor in Muslim families (Ahmad, 2001). Thus, although gender may play an important role in the education of the students in this study, it is not perceived to be by them or their parents.

This study found that the parent participants wanted as much information about the school as possible. It was suggested that that this desire may be related to the success of the students in the study.

#### **4. Peers**

Much of the research on the influence of peers on school performance was found to apply to the students in this study. They indicated their friends were very important to them. Most tended to hang out with other Iranians. The ones who had been in Canada the longest reported having the most diverse group of friends, and they seemed to have a high level of confidence. The students indicated that they felt extracurricular activities were a good way to get to know students from other backgrounds and they felt that they would be very beneficial, although they themselves were not involved in them for the most part.

There were also points on which the views of the students in the current study conflicted with other research findings. The students, parents, and teachers all felt that it was new arrivals who were most likely to be getting into trouble and performing poorly in school. Research suggests the opposite; that it is second and third generation immigrant students who do so (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Despite their focus on Iranian students who are not doing well, none of the student participants spoke of negative peer pressure to act out or underachieve in school. Research suggests that this pressure is strong, particularly for males (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Although no gender differences were noted by the study participants, the examples they provided when describing Iranian students displaying inappropriate behaviour all involved males.

#### **5. School**

After language issues, differences in schools in Iran and their new school was the topic most discussed by students and parents. They stated that in Iran classes were segregated according to sex, more advanced and difficult, there was more discipline and structure, and

that the teachers were stricter and more formal. Both students and parents felt that these differences gave newcomer students a sense of freedom. They attributed not knowing how to handle this new experience as the reason why many Iranian youth are underperforming and misbehaving in school and becoming involved in gang and criminal activity. The students and their parents expressed their concern and embarrassment over this phenomenon.

The students generally described their teachers as approachable, helpful, and caring. Studies have shown these teacher traits to be very important in the academic achievement of all students. Both students and teachers indicated they would like to have more teachers with Iranian backgrounds at the school. The students indicated that they would like their teachers to know more about the Persian culture. There was indication that there were some misunderstandings amongst their teachers about this culture. There was also indication that some teachers at the school may take a colour-blind approach to education.

Some teachers participating in this study expressed concern about what they felt was a widespread practice of cheating amongst Iranian students. The parents and students in the study did not share this concern. Similar to the teachers in Hoffman's (1988) study of Iranian students in American schools, the teachers in the current study felt that there may be a difference in perceptions of cheating amongst Iranian students and their Canadian classmates. Although the parents and students indicated that they viewed cheating as immoral it is not possible from the findings to determine whether they do indeed hold different perceptions from members of other ethnic groups of what constitutes cheating.

The students did not indicate a concern for acquiring information about classes and/or grades required for future plans. The parents, however, felt a great need for such information. The teachers also indicated that they felt newcomer students needed this information. The teachers were not aware of the services which were offered by counsellors to these students.

Perceptions about English as a second language and transition classes were presented above. The students felt that many Iranian students did not feel they were placed appropriately upon their arrival at the school. However, given that they themselves were generally happy with their own placement, this may be a false assumption.

The findings of this study may support the research indicating that there may be a disproportionate number of culturally diverse students receiving special education services other than English as a second language.

## **6. Racism**

The students for the most part indicated that they did not personally perceive barriers to school success based on their ethnicity. Despite this, they were able to provide examples of discrimination which they had witnessed or heard about on the part of teachers towards Iranian students. They also appeared worried that their teachers tended to stereotype them based on the action of “bad” Persian students. The teachers, in turn, indicated that many Iranian students wrongly accused them of discriminating on the basis of their ethnicity when they got into trouble or were performing poorly in classes. Thus, there is the existence of racial tensions at the school. Furthermore, there is indication that students, parents, and teachers may prefer to ignore these tensions, as well as their differences, and to cling to the colourblind approach to education.

The students also felt that there was a good deal of negative stereotyping of Iranians being presented in the media, particularly after September 11, 2001. The students expressed their dismay at being lumped together with Arabs following this event. Resulting Islamophobia seemed to upset them and may be a factor in their preference not to describe themselves as religious despite their adherence to some or many Muslim beliefs and practices. It was also thought to have affected the way at least one student presented himself, indicating he at times did not want people to know that he was Persian. There was no evidence of an “Islamic reassertion” as a response to Islamophobia on the part of the students other than a stated deep respect for those students who did more openly display their Muslim religion.

### **D. New Directions for Further Research**

As mentioned above, the generalizability of the findings of this study are limited. Similar studies using a random sample would be beneficial in order to ensure a wider range of opinions. Including Iranian students who are experiencing difficulty in school, second and third generation immigrant students, Iranian students in other Canadian schools, and those in areas not as wealthy as the one where the study took place would also increase this range. With increasing amounts of information from a greater number of students, the clearer the picture would be of the Iranian schooling experience in Canada.

Including students from different groups would also allow for comparisons to be made. Knowing how the perceptions of successful students differ from those of students experiencing difficulty may be particularly useful to educators to better help those in the

latter group. Comparison of first with second and third generation immigrants could be used to examine the hypothesis that the latter groups of students are more likely to misbehave and perform poorly in school. This comparison would be particularly interesting in light of the findings of the current study in which the students, parents, and teachers all felt it was the new arrivals who were acting out the most.

Another valuable area of study would be a comparison of the perceptions of Iranian students with those from other backgrounds. While cross-cultural comparisons have been criticized for promoting stereotypes, some such studies may help guide educators wanting to better understand different cultural groups. As was shown in the current study, some educators feel a great need for such information in order to be better able to practise culturally sensitive teaching.

The findings of this study point to many areas of concern which require further investigation. Language was the chief concern of the students and parents in this study. A more in-depth look within the school where the study took place at the needs of the students and whether the services in place meet these needs would be extremely beneficial. This may include studies examining the placement process for newly arriving immigrants and the goals and outcomes of current transition classes. Ways in which educators may help parents and students to recognize and accept the complexity of second language acquisition would also be a useful study, since this was identified as a need.

Another area of concern which dominated the students' and parents' discussions had to do with the sense of freedom they described as commonly occurring in newly arriving Iranian students. A more in-depth look at the existence of such a phenomenon and what factors may be related to it would be beneficial, as few studies have referred to it. Furthermore, a study of strategies students use to help with the new freedom they experience when coming to Canada would also be particularly helpful.

One factor which may be related to the sense of a new freedom in Iranian students is father absenteeism. The findings of this study indicate that many believe that the fathers of Iranian students in Canada may be away from their family for long periods of time. A quantitative study may help determine the reality of this perception. Further investigation into the effects of father absenteeism on student academic performance, and how these effects might be minimized would also be beneficial.

According to Hoffman (1988), Iranians are noted for their strong family orientation. Findings of the current study supported this assumption. In addition to father absenteeism,

loneliness, lack of attention, lack of stability and sense of permanence, and concern for their mothers' well-being were all factors identified by the students in the current study as affecting the academic achievement of Iranian students in their new school. A more thorough investigation into these factors may allow educators insight into how they can help minimize their negative effects. A study on how successful students are dealing with these factors may be particularly useful. A study at the community level to identify available resources and aid would also be beneficial.

There was an identified need in the literature review for studies examining the role of religion in academic achievement. Given the ambiguous feelings identified by the students in the current study towards religion, as well as the existence of "Islamophobia", a study in this area including Iranian students may be particularly revealing. It was also suggested from the current study that openness and tolerance towards those who are strongly religious may be positive factors in the learning of successful Iranian students, and this is another area which could also be investigated further.

Another area identified as needing further investigation was the role of gender in the academic achievement of Muslim students. It was not brought up as an issue by the parents or students in the current study. Whether this may be due to characteristics of the individuals studied, or whether the education differences between Muslim men and women are decreasing, as at least one recent study has shown (Association for Canadian Studies, 2003), would be a useful determination to make.

It has been suggested that Iranian and Canadian students may perceive cheating differently. More research in this area is required before this assumption can be accepted or challenged. A more in-depth look at the practices of cheating in the school where the current study took place would also be useful to help the educators better define the problem and to help determine means to minimize it.

Racism in Canada is a social issue which continues to endure, but is denied (Moodley, 1985; Reitz & Bretton, 1994; Clarke, 1998; Chigbo, 1998; Codjoe, 2001). The current study indicated that this may be the case in the school where it took place. Racism and discrimination are extremely sensitive issues, but ones which must be acknowledged and examined. Educators need to know their impact on the educational experiences and opportunities of culturally diverse students. Mehan (1996) states:

The current generation of minorities reflect a faith in the potential of schooling to solve or at least deal with social problems. Although they feel victimized by systematic

discrimination, they do not dismiss schools. Indeed, they express confidence that schools are or can be sites that foster the opportunity for children to succeed.

Educators owe it to their culturally diverse students to keep this spirit of striving and determination alive and to help rid their schools of racism and discrimination. In order to do so, however, many more studies are needed. It is necessary to know what conditions, both in and around schools, are needed to articulate and realize this challenge.

One factor which was identified in the literature review as conducive to a more prejudice-free environment was more ethnic teacher role models. Students and teachers in the current study perceived the need for more Iranian teachers in their school. There may be, however, few Iranian students who are interested in the teaching profession. Studies examining students' perceptions on a career in education would be useful to determine whether students in different ethnic groups want to become teachers, or whether they hold feelings and/or values which discourage them from this profession. If there is a perceived need for more culturally diverse teachers, teacher training institutions must identify ways to recruit such candidates.

Another problem we cannot ignore is youth gang and criminal activity. Iranian-Canadian youth are beginning to form gangs on the north shore of the Vancouver area (Seifi, 2004). The students in the current study did not indicate they felt pressure to partake in such activities. This suggests we may have much to learn from studies examining strategies successful students use to minimize negative peer pressure.

The researcher indicated at the beginning of this paper that one of the concerns she had which helped lead to the current study was that many of the students referred to her as a school psychologist were from culturally diverse backgrounds. The findings of this study support the notion that these students may be overrepresented in special education services. Quantitative studies could be used to confirm this at the school or district level. Other studies which help in this challenging area must continue.

#### **E. Recommendations at the School Level**

As pointed out above, there is a need for knowing some Iranian students' perceptions of academic achievement. This knowledge, however, does not address the concern of what needs to be done in the school to make the experiences more positive for these and/or other students with Iranian backgrounds, nor does it suggest that solutions to the problems are easy and straightforward. This information does, however, allow for a better understanding of

what it could be like to be an immigrant student with Iranian background in a high school in a wealthy area in Canada. This understanding can provide a starting point for making positive change. The recommendations provided below may provide some direction to such reform.

It is important to note that the focus of this section on the school does not deny the influence of community or larger societal factors in the academic achievement of culturally diverse students. It does, however, recognize the scope for change through educational policy and practice, and it is hoped that it provides educators with the desire and encouragement to make a difference. Examining ways the school can begin to help culturally diverse students also helps dispel theories and approaches that place the onus for explanation and change within the minority communities themselves and that leave the mainstream education system exempt from responsibility.

#### **F. Recommendations Involving Educators**

The students and parents participating in this study seemed honoured and appreciative that an educator desired to know more about their culture and their feelings about school. A result of this study was thus the “ethnography of empowerment” (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991); that is, it used ethnographic research methods to frame educational reform and to empower the participants. Nieto (2000) states:

The fact that empowerment can take place through dialogue should not be lost on teachers. Not only can we learn something from students about their cultures and languages through interviews, but dialogue of this kind can and should become a useful pedagogical strategy in itself. (p.19)

It is thus hoped that hearing the feelings and experiences of the students in this study may inspire educators at the school to listen to their culturally diverse students. Listening to students’ voices may reward them with insights into issues that may have been overlooked in previous attempts at school reform. What students say can help guide the development and implementation of pedagogical strategies, programs, and services. This allows recognition of the significant role students themselves can play in creating better educational opportunities for all students.

Results of this study support the notion that ethnicity is an important variable influencing students’ performance in school. They suggest that, despite a plethora of research and literature indicating its dangers, the colour-blind approach to education persists.

Continued efforts to eradicate this view are required. More teachers representing the ethnic demographics in our current schools can help raise awareness and understanding. Other teachers need to be encouraged to take time to find out about their students' lives outside the classroom, and to learn more about their culture, life and history. They can do so through individual readings, taking courses at a local college or university, or by participating in cross-cultural experiences in their own country or in other nations (Banks and Banks, 2001). They can also do so by talking to parents, students and community members and immersing themselves in various facets of the day-to-day environment that some of these students experience.

Teachers who take the time to learn more about their students' backgrounds and lives understand that their culture affects their attitudes and perceptions about school, as well as their actions. The more they know about their students' cultural backgrounds, the less likely that misunderstandings and misinterpretations will occur. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations are more likely to manifest themselves in a multitude of punitive actions in schools such as suspension, expulsion, and other disciplinary actions (Codjoe, 2001).

Learning about their students' cultural backgrounds can also allow teachers to recognize common characteristics some groups of students may have, and to take this into account in their classrooms. Equally important, teachers will discover firsthand the diversity and complexity of a particular group of students such as those with Iranian background. They will be alerted to the inappropriateness of stereotypes and will be acutely aware that students within every cultural group differ from each other in many ways. It is only with such an awareness that teachers can recognize the daunting energy some students may be expending in an effort to overcome stereotype threat. With this awareness teachers can also diffuse the effects of such unfavorable images by emphasizing positive cultural aspects and contributions to world civilizations. They need to do so, however, in a way which extends beyond a "Heroes and Holidays" approach. Rather than merely adding ethnic content to the curriculum, student cultures must be incorporated when teachers develop their instructional principles, and ethnic content must be integrated into the mainstream curriculum (Banks & Banks, 2001).

Teachers who understand cultural characteristics students may bring to school are also less likely to view differences as deficits, which some older theory and approaches to the study of academic achievement of culturally diverse students have unfortunately encouraged. As the newer approaches to the study of academic achievement in culturally diverse students

suggest, educators can recognize and celebrate the positive strengths, values, and skills that bicultural students can bring to the classroom. These include linguistic skills, an expanded worldview, feeling comfortable in a variety of settings, adaptability, and less prejudice and more tolerance.

Teachers who get to know their culturally diverse students are also more sensitive to the challenges these students confront by living in two (or more) cultures. Okagaki and Sternberg (1993) state that “identifying differences in values and social norms among cultural groups and explicitly acknowledging the difficulties of simultaneously living in two social worlds may help children better adapt to their school roles and to succeed in their role as creators of a way of life that reflects the traditions, values, and languages of both their home and school cultures” (p.52). The ultimate goal for educators is thus to become “cultural accommodators and mediators”; that is to help students to understand, adapt and thrive at same time as they make modifications in their teaching styles to align them more closely with student needs (Nieto, 1999).

Teachers who know their students are in a better position to attach new learning to that which has already been achieved, a practice recommended by psychologists including Bruner (1996) and Vygotsky (1978). This process safeguards students’ self-images and self-confidence, while expanding their knowledge and skills. Teachers who scaffold learning demonstrate they care for their students. As previously discussed, having teachers who care has been found to be critical for culturally diverse students. Other ways in which teachers can demonstrate that they care are by holding high expectations, giving positive reinforcement and praising student accomplishments (Howard, 2001). Research shows that students who do not regard their teachers as caring respond through alternative means of coping, such as copying other students’ work, creating disruptions in class, or withdrawing quietly from the class (Phelan, Yu and Davidson, 1994).

Many immigrant students, including those in the current study, suggest that students arriving from other parts of the world are shocked by what they see as a lack of discipline and structure in their new North American schools. The students in the current study also spoke of a new sense of freedom some youth from Iran are not able to cope with when they arrive in their new country. The teacher participants expressed frustration over a group of Iranian students who misbehave and underperform in class. In order to address these concerns school administrators need to ensure that there is a consistent discipline system in place in their schools. Boundaries need to be clearly defined, the students well informed, and

the boundaries need to be enforced. Many culturally diverse students regard this support and supervision as a sign of caring on the part of their school.

Another way the school can show culturally diverse students they care is to encourage their participation in extracurricular activities. Participation in extra curricular activities has been found to keep students on track, to remove them from negative peer pressure, to develop their leadership and critical thinking skills, and to give them a feeling of belonging. As was shown in the literature review, extra curricular activities may be especially helpful for culturally diverse students, and these are the students among the least likely to participate in them. Schools need to take extra efforts to encourage their involvement in these activities.

### **G. Recommendations for Services, Programs, and Classes**

Immigrant families' first encounters with the school are critical. Research has shown that lack of information and the inability to understand what is expected of them are often frightening and frustrating aspects of new school experiences (Anderson, 2002). Participants in the current study all expressed a need for services during this critical time. There was indication that the students and their parents, as well as teachers within the school, were not aware of services the school did offer during this time, including an orientation from the counsellor and the availability of peer tutors. It was noted that having a large Iranian population and parent volunteers with Iranian background who make themselves available to new arrivals is very beneficial for the distribution of information. Schools need to continue to encourage parents to provide these valuable services.

During initial encounters school personnel must decide where to place newcomer students. Research indicates that placement procedures in British Columbian schools are often criticized as unfair (Anderson, 2002; LaRocque, 1999). The students in the current study had this perception despite the fact that they themselves were happy with their own placement upon their arrival at the school. Schools should carefully consider their procedures for placing new students and whether they leave themselves open to criticism. While clearly defined guidelines would seem to be one way that schools can avoid such criticism, research findings, including those from the current study, indicate individual factors, including where a student is coming from, need to be taken into account for students to be placed into programs and classes which best suit their past learning and current needs.

Research indicates that school English as a Second Language (ESL) classes are also often criticized for not meeting the needs of students or for not preparing them adequately for

future classes (Anderson, 2002). The parents and students in the current study felt that such classes were very beneficial to newcomer students; they did, however, question the value of transition classes. These classes are designed for students who have had ESL classes, but who are not yet ready for regular classes. While the parents and students indicated that they would rather be in regular classes than transition ones, teacher participants stressed the need for more and/or expanded transition classes. This discrepancy in perceptions of the value of transition classes suggests that it is an area requiring further examination, as indicated in the section above. It is imperative that the goals and outcomes of both ESL and transition classes are communicated to students and parents so that they may understand the rationale behind these classes and recognize the benefits they are providing. Efforts to communicate to parents and students that learning a new language, particularly at the academic proficiency level, takes time, and of the dangers of setting unrealistic expectations, are required. This communication is essential in order for schools and families to work together to best support the learning needs of ESL students.

There is a tendency for schools to place the onus for helping culturally diverse students on ESL teachers. These teachers are most often seen as the main providers of services for these students. The disproportionate number of culturally diverse students receiving special education services may also indicate that secondary subject teachers have not accepted enough responsibility for helping meet the needs of their culturally diverse students. As our school populations continue to diversify, all educators must accept and rise to the challenge of this responsibility.

## **H. Recommendations to Optimize Family Support**

Recent research indicates that families who maintain their language and culture are more likely to have children who experience academic success (Abi-Nader, 1990; Deyhle, 1995; Edwards, Fear & Gallego, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Stachowski, 1998). It is thus most critical that educators set aside old notions of the school as assimilators of students, and that they allow and encourage families to identify with their native languages and cultures. The students will then be in a position to define their own identities based on both their parents and their new cultures, which the successful students in the current study appeared to be doing.

Effective schools recognize the significant role of family in their children's academic success. They know the importance of good home-school communication. They ensure that

all communications between the home and school are translated into the language of the home, so that parents are kept informed of school activities and expectations. They encourage and promote maximum parental involvement.

Effective schools also know that they must encourage their students' families towards certain values and actions in a way which is sensitive to the families' priorities, resources, and in a nonjudgmental, respectful mode (Villarruel, Imig, & Kostelnik, 1995). Research has found that parents who contributed most successfully to their children's academic achievement emphasized importance of reading; held high expectations of their children and instilled in them a strong sense of discipline; interacted closely with their children's teachers and took a strong interest in their children's homework; gave their children plenty of love and support; communicated with their children openly and consistently; contributed to their children's focus on a positive racial identity; relied on such community resources as religious groups and extracurricular activities for support; and helped their children understand that defining themselves as victims of prejudice would not contribute to their ultimate success (Hrabowski, 2002). Promoting these traits and actions in families at the school can help to create an optimum learning environment for their children.

Although setting high standards and encouraging academic excellence are certainly important goals that schools need to encourage in culturally diverse families, they also need to make these families aware of the danger of applying undue pressure to succeed on their children. Findings of this study, as well as others, indicate the result of such pressure can be cheating and psychosocial costs. Families need to be made aware of this, and it must be emphasized to them that there are educational goals beyond those that are outcome based and that success cannot be measured in terms of grades and test scores alone.

## **I. Recommendations for Combating Racism**

As indicated in the literature review, racism persists in our nations' schools. Sims (2004), former head of the British Columbia Human Rights Commission, states that, despite this, to date there have been no concerted nor sustained measures, nor available resources committed to combat racism in our schools. Our society tends to ignore, deny and/or minimize the existence of racism. It is often when an incidence of violence or crime comes up that its existence surfaces, becoming a concern for only as long as the sensational headlines it generates. We owe it to our students to give the issue of racism the attention it requires, beginning with the acknowledgment that it is in our communities and schools.

A recent study in the lower mainland of British Columbia indicated that educational leaders need to improve their attitudes to and understanding of multiculturalism and anti-racism and ensure that all staff understand and enact anti-racist practices (LaRocque, 1999). School officials need to be proactive and admit the existence of racism and put time and energy into studying the interactions in their schools.

James (1995) states, “our aim must be to provide an educational climate where difficult issues can be taken up, and all students can voice how they see the issues that affect their aspirations” (p. 53). By exploring such issues as racism and discrimination, as well as by raising awareness of the impact of racism on the educational opportunities of culturally diverse students, we can develop a theory and practice of education that is multicultural, anti-racist, comprehensive, pervasive, and rooted in social justice.

The design and implementation of anti-racist and multicultural school programs are goals to which all schools should be committed. Until recently Canadian educators have been offered few strategies and activities they can use to work towards these goals. The events of September 11, 2001 have pushed the need for more guidance in this area to the forefront, and appropriate agencies are now responding. For example, the National Association of School Psychologists (2002) in the United States acknowledged the added stresses that Arab-Americans and members of the Islamic faith may face following September 11, 2001, and they offered several prevention activities to help decrease racial and religious tensions. These included developing threat assessment procedures; creating safety task forces that include students; building positive faculty/student relations with the goal that students view adults as trustworthy and caring; developing policies and programs to reduce bullying; personalizing massive schools and helping instill in students a sense of belonging; providing classroom discussions on safety and tolerance; developing and/or clarifying procedures to prevent youth suicide; modeling tolerance of diversity; and, among school and community leaders of different races and religions, collaborating and uniting in efforts to support students.

The Canadian Heritage Group (2003) has recently published a resource guide to community services for dealing with the trauma of racism. These brochures are available in many schools throughout British Columbia, including the one where the study took place. The brochure suggests that racism against an individual, or towards a group following a horrible event such as the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy can be painful. It lists what a student can do if they experience or witness a hate crime or racism, and where to find help. They also

list coping techniques for people who have experienced racism, and provide a list of ways to assist students to cope. These include: listening to and accepting student's feelings; giving honest, simple, short answers to their questions; maintaining normal routines as much as possible; if an event has occurred and there is media coverage, discourage students (particularly younger ones) from watching; create opportunities for students to talk to each other about what happened and what they are feeling; help them use creative outlets like art and music to express their feelings; and be especially caring and supportive.

In conclusion, schools have to take a proactive approach in promoting a school culture where racism is challenged and diversity is accepted and viewed as an asset. Educators must work together with families and communities to promote social justice and equality in schools. As this study has shown, a valuable resource for effective school reform is students themselves. Not only are they in the best position to express the concerns which most affect them, but encouraging students to feel that they are part of an improvement process challenges them to become responsible for their school success.

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## APPENDIX A

### STUDENT INTERVIEWS

In-depth semi-structured interviews were used with student participants. The experiences and perceptions of the participants in regards to academic achievement were sought and the researcher strove to maximize the participants' views and to gain their honest feelings and opinions. The following focus questions were used as a rough guide to the interviews. Which of these questions were asked, what alterations they required, and in what order they were presented was determined by the direction the individual interview took (See **APPENDIX B** for example).

What do you feel has most attributed to your academic successes?

Have you ever had or are you having any difficulties in school? What do you feel has most attributed to your academic difficulties?

How do you describe yourself to others? Does your ethnic background contribute greatly to your sense of identity?

Research has linked ethnicity to school performance. Do you feel your Iranian background has contributed to your school successes or difficulties? If so, in what ways?

Following is a list of variables which have been related to the academic achievement of culturally diverse students in past research, and which my studies have prepared me to examine.

- Socioeconomic status
- Parental expectations
- Family support
- Language (s)
- Peer support/pressure
- Personal characteristics (self esteem, motivation)
- Acculturation
- Curriculum
- Ethnic Identity
- Gender
- Homework habits
- Learning Styles
- Teacher Characteristics
- Teaching Styles
- Religion
- Racism/Prejudice
- School Characteristics (size, assessment procedures, tracking procedures)

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## APPENDIX B

### An Example of an Interview Transcript

This appendix includes an example of an interview transcript. This serves to illustrate the open-ended characteristic of questions asked and the avoidance of leading questions during the interviews. **C** = Researcher; **M** = Student

**C** - This is \*\*\*\*, and you've been at the school since September?

**M** - Yes.

**C** - And came from Iran. Up to that point you had all your schooling in Iran?

**M** - Yes, not all, grade 4 and 1 we were in Canada.

**C** - So, what I am really after today is to get an idea of what you think helps Iranian students at this school and things that might make it more difficult for them. Did you experience many difficulties when you came? It can be anything.

**M** - Over the courses?

**C** - Or just feeling uncomfortable, anything that caused some difficulties?

**M** - I didn't had a lot of difficulties because my English wasn't bad so no problem at all but my friends had a little problem because of language. Oh, first thing is that I was supposed to be in Grade 12 but they put me in Grade 11. That was the most important thing that I had to accept.

**C** - Did you think that made it more difficult for you because you would rather have been in Grade 12?

**M** - Yeah, because the things that I am studying now actually I was. I studied most of them in Grade 10 and that was two years ago because I finished Grade 11 and especially Chemistry is so easy and Physics is easy too.

**C** - So you are in Chemistry and Physics 11?

**M** - Yeah and Math 11 - everything 11. Math is easy but I think I studied the most part of Math 12 too.

**C** – How do you think that the school could make the situation different? How do you think they would be able to make it so that they would know where to place the students?

**M** – I don't know because the way that we gave our exams back in Iran was really different from here because I had a final exam for Grade 11 to get my diploma and mostly every year when they give these exams they choose one course to give really hard for all the students and, I don't know why, but most fail in that certain exam. But the year that I was given the exam, my Chemistry was really hard and it was – I heard that in every place that there were marking the exam, out of 40 exams 30 of them failed and that was a lot and from that exam I got 15 out of 20 and that was good because people mostly failed. But they don't know that this is happening in my country but two years ago the Physics exam was really hard and a lot of people failed and that was a lot harder than the Chemistry last year and they had to make another day for the Physics exam so they gave it two times. And they thought that it was my own grade that was so low and they thought that I would fail in Chemistry if I go in Chemistry 12 but the Chemistry that I learned in Grade 11 back in Iran, they are probably learning that in probably 2nd year of University. It was really hard. And my math was really harder back in Iran but Physics is almost like, if I am in Grade 12 the things that they were learning, I learned them in Grade 11 but Math and Chemistry two years ago. Physics is nearer to our Physics here.

**C** – What do you think they looked at when they were deciding where to place you? Did you have to write any exams?

**M** – To go in Grade 12 again? If I could write the exam again, I would do it because when I came to this school the first day to register they just gave me the Math exam on the first day and I didn't know what it was about and that was really hard because you had three months of summer and things that were on the exam were from two years ago that you had learned and I didn't know what it was about and even though your English is good but you never learn what is function in any English classes, like you don't learn the math words that we used in English so the questions I knew kind of what they were but I didn't know what the question wanted from me. There were really similar to the ones that we had but it was hard to find out what they want from me.

**C** – Did you find out how you did on that?

**M** – Yes, it wasn't good at all. My mark was almost like 50% but I think if I knew what it was going to be about, the test, and I had studied the book at least to have looked at it to find out what the words are and what they might ask, that would have been so easier for me.

**C** – So how are you doing in your Grade 11 classes now?

**M** – I am doing good. I got straight A's from my last report card, except for my P.E. and that doesn't have anything to do with some of this stuff and most of

them were around 86 and 87% because I missed two weeks at the beginning of the year and when I first went to Math class the next day, they had a quiz and I didn't know what it was about so the reason they were around 86% was because of the first quizzes that I gave but this term they are all around 92 or 93%.

**C** – That's good. Is there anything else at the school that was difficult for you?

**M** – No

**C** – How about getting to know people, was that difficult at all?

**M** – No

**C** – Was there anything at the school that really helped you get into your classes and do well? Did ESL help?

**M** – No

**C** – So, there is really nothing that helped you to succeed here that you can think of?

**M** – It would be better if there were less Persians because all around you there are Persians and they are all talking in Farsi and your English won't get better. But I know my friends that were in (Another high school in the district), their English is really better than mine. We were in Canada for three years but he was here for just one year at that school and he speaks as well as me.

**C** – That's interesting. How would you describe yourselves now that you have been here in Canada for three years? Do you say that you are Persian, do you say you are a Canadian, do you say you are a Persian-Canadian or do you even think about it?

**M** – Persian but I am a citizen of Canada. I don't know, if somebody asks me I will say that I am Persian.

**C** – And your Mum and Dad are both Persian. Has your dad been working in Canada?

**M** – No, he has been working in Iran. But he will be working here soon.

**C** – Ok. Did he come with you before when you were here?

**M** – Yes

**C** – You haven't seen him since ...?

**M** – September, no.

**C** – So, your Persian background is important to you? Do you think it makes things different for you at school as compared to ...

**M** – Some teachers ... yes

**C** – Can you tell me more about that?

**M** – Some teachers are better with Canadians than Persians.

**C** – How so?

**M** – Their treatment, everything. I think that is because of their own behavior – the Persian's behavior, not all of them. In every nationality there are different people and, you know, some of the Persians are acting in a way that they mostly get suspended or they just make the teachers go crazy about something they don't listen and that is not only the Persians but they are from a different country, the teachers mostly see them, but the Canadians, they might do the same thing but they are from their own country and they don't pick on them. I don't know.

**C** – Do you think that the ones, you said some of them might be fooling around or different behavior, can you categorize them at all? Is it the new arrivals or ...

**M** – Yes, they're mostly new arrivals.

**C** – Can you give me any other examples of that? Different treatment?

**M** – No. They want us to study. Some of the Persians they are so rich that they don't need to study actually. Their parents are giving them everything but, I don't know.

**C** – You were saying that some of them don't even think that they need to study. What is it that makes you study? Is it something from inside of you? Is it your parents?

**M** – First of all, for myself, I came for studying. If I didn't want to study, I would rather stay in my own country.

**C** – But yet the schooling according to you is harder and more difficult in Iran?

**M** – Yes, it is.

**C** – So you would get a better education?

**M** – It's kind of different. When you are in high school there, it is so hard. You have to study until 6:00 in the morning, you come back home at 3:00 or 3:30 and you have to study maybe until 12:00 pm or 1:00 am and get some sleep if you want to go to University and this way of studying is mostly in Grade 12 because it's the last chance you know about the big exam for University and 2 million students are volunteered for this exam and they only want 200,000 of them and that's really low compared with the people that are giving the exam and so this makes the competition really hard. And the exam is not like what you read and study in school. It is really harder. You have to find other books. Mostly every student goes to other classes and they have tutors or other classes outside school for learning the harder questions.

**C** – So this is all because of pressure of you wanting to go to University?

**M** – Yes.

**C** – Do your parents put pressure on you to get good grades?

**M** – No, well, a little, if I don't study. They ask do you have anything to study or not but no pressure.

**C** – What about the teachers here, do you think they have high expectations for you?

**M** – No

**C** – Do you think they should have higher?

**M** – No, it's like good...

**C** – Do you have high aspirations? What would you like to do when you're done high school?

**M** – I want to study engineering at University but I haven't decided what. Maybe computer.

**C** – Do you see you or your family going back to Iran or you don't know at this point?

**M** – I don't know. I want to go back for work but I don't know what will happen then because mostly people say that you say this now but when you finish University, you don't want to go back. I don't know, maybe that will happen.

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