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Social Integration Experiences of Young Newcomers in Canadian High Schools and the  
Importance of Friendship

by

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## Abstract

As the population of young newcomers (immigrants, refugees and international students) increases in Canada, there is a growing need to understand the social integration process of these students into Canadian schools. This thesis reports a qualitative analysis of how newcomer students in three Canadian schools perceived their experiences interacting with local students. I explored two research questions: (1) What do newcomers perceive as factors that hinder intercultural friendships with local students? (2) How should the notion of social integration be re-conceptualized based on newcomers' experiences?

The data analyzed was derived from a larger project by Zhao et al. (2017), which aimed to establish a conceptual framework for understanding intercultural friendship formation in Canadian high schools. I used the thematic analysis (TA) approach to analyze interviews and identify themes and subthemes to address the research questions. Participants of the interviews included in my analysis were 19 newcomer students from three high schools in Alberta. Despite newcomer students' strong motivations to socially connect with local students, several barriers prevented this. In addition to a lack of English proficiency, newcomer students lacked the confidence to have conversations with local students and preferred to interact with other newcomers because of their shared status, identity, and experiences as newcomers. Participants believed local students were not interested in them and/or were intolerant of their English language struggles. This study provides new evidence of the psychological and social challenges that hinder the social integration of young newcomers in Canadian schools. I also critically examined the conceptualization of the term *social integration* and its current implications.

*Keywords:* social integration, intercultural friendship, newcomer student, high school, Canada

## **Preface**

This thesis was part of a larger research project entitled “Newcomer Social Integration in School Context: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding What Hinders and Supports Intercultural Friendships Between Newcomers and Canadian Students.” The principal investigators of this original project are Dr. Xu Zhao and Dr. Nancy Arthur. The project received ethics approval from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. It was also supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant to the principal investigators.

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To my family, I could not imagine achieving any of this without your support, blessings, and help. In particular to you, my dad, thank you for supporting my decision to switch academic paths at this later stage in my life. It was always comforting to know that I had you by my side throughout my Bachelor's and Master's degrees. You have been a great role model who truly believes in the importance of mental health and in doing good for people and the Muslim community. To my mom, my cornerstone, your daily checking and regular Doa'aa (prayers) have been a safeguard to me during this challenging period. Also, I want to thank you my dear sister and best friend, Leena, who supported me emotionally, always encouraged me, pushed me to achieve my potential, and always believed in me.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

One fall afternoon in 2019, I was waiting for the bus to arrive on my way back home and a nice lady who was also waiting began some small talk with me. She introduced herself as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. She said she enjoyed working with newcomers throughout their learning processes, and witnessing their successes and achievements along the way. The teacher shared what she described as an amusing story in which one of her ESL students asked whether her dog would spend the weekend with her or her “extra-husband.” She had laughed and explained to the student that she did not need an “extra-husband” and that the “ex” in “ex-husband” stands for “exit,” not “extra” and then everybody laughed.

Despite its simplicity, this story indicates the depth of some linguistic, social, and cultural issues newcomers face in transitioning and adjusting to their new homes. Throughout the various stages of this study as I engaged with newcomer participants’ learning experiences and social interactions with local students, I found this story very relevant. In the Discussion chapter, I will connect this story to my observations and analysis of newcomers’ perceptions of friendship with local students.

With global migration and the rapid growth of diversity across different populations, the number of international and immigrant students continues to rise worldwide. North America is a destination with an increasing number of international students (Williams & Johnson, 2011). For example, in Alberta, the number of students receiving ESL instruction increased from 37,000 in 2005–2006 to 67,000 in 2010–2011 (Lamba & Cui, 2019). The authors reported that the continuous growth in the number of ESL students in Alberta over the past decade may be mostly attributable to increased immigration (Lamba & Cui, 2019). With this rise in the number of

immigrant students, there is a need for research that deeply examines this group's experiences of social and emotional adaptation to a new environment.

Throughout their immigration process, youth sometimes must leave their families, friends, and other social ties behind in their home countries. They often face difficulties building friendships and other relationships while navigating the challenges of their own psychosocial development in their host countries (Tsai, 2006). In the school environment, newcomer students are more likely to form friendships with students from their home country or other newcomer students, whereas only a small number of newcomer students develop friendships with local students (Celikkol et al., 2017; Delgado et al., 2015; Hendrickson et al., 2011). Although intercultural friendships between newcomer and local students are less common, these relationships are connected to positive feelings such as satisfaction, social connectedness, and decreased homesickness (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Despite these positive outcomes for students, limited literature has focused on the adolescent age group. The lack of literature on the preferences of young newcomer students in friendship formation reflects a lack of understanding about the social and emotional challenges newcomers face in their host countries (e.g., need for belonging, knowledge of the host country's language, settlement-related issues) as well as their perceptions of cross-cultural friendship formation. The current study aimed to address this gap by shedding light on this neglected age group.

The adolescent years are a crucial period for the social and emotional development of young people. The development of social skills at this stage set the foundation for the post-secondary stage and determine students' success in adapting to university life (Jabeen et al., 2019). However, the existing literature on migration largely focuses on the adaptation processes of adult immigrants in terms of settlement, employment, and cultural and social challenges.

There is limited literature on newcomer students' social integration and friendship processes in Canadian high schools. In addition, the existing literature lacks a clear understanding of the integration process from the perspective of newcomer students and focuses primarily on the theoretical definition of the term *social integration* rather than its practical implementation and the impact of this on the quality of life of newcomers.

In order to address the gap in the existing literature about newcomer students' cross-cultural relationships, the current study focused on these students' perceptions of friendship formation in Canadian high schools. Understanding immigrant youths' perspectives about what facilitates or hinders friendship formation with local students is important. By seeing challenges and barriers from this group's point of view, psychologists can better understand foundational friendship issues, such as the meaning of friendship and friendship formation. In addition, knowledge of these friendship dynamics from newcomer students' perspectives will aid school counsellors, psychologists, teachers, and mental health workers in adopting culturally sensitive approaches when helping this population. Furthermore, this study challenges the existing understanding and definition of social integration, which can assist policymakers to establish processes that help newcomer students smoothly integrate into Canadian high schools by taking into consideration newcomers' own perspectives and needs.

### **The Larger Project: Research Context and Design**

The data presented here come from a larger study conducted by Zhao et al. (2017). The aim of that study was to present a conceptual framework that described key psychological, interpersonal, and cultural factors that facilitate or hinder intercultural relationships, in particular friendships between newcomer and local students. The conceptual framework was developed from a grounded theory study of peer relationships between newcomer and local students

attending Canadian high schools. The study involved in-depth interviews with both newcomer and Canadian students and aimed to understand their experiences and perceptions of intercultural peer relationships, especially close friendships. To identify factors that facilitate or hinder school-based intercultural friendships, the authors examined participants' experiences and meaning-making of intercultural friendship within the contexts of networks, situations, and hierarchies of power. Specifically, Zhao et al. (2017) examined three interrelated processes: individual meaning-making (the psychological realm), power dynamics (the interpersonal realm), and cultural norms and practices (the cultural realm). The aim was to identify multilevel factors that influence intercultural friendships in order to inform theory, research, and practice related to newcomer social integration.

This larger project investigated how young newcomers (i.e., immigrants, refugees, and international students) and local Canadian students perceive and experience intercultural peer relationships. In order to come up with an inclusive conceptual framework that accounted for all possible factors influencing intercultural relationships, the authors assumed that to socially integrate into their new environments, newcomers would have to negotiate between the culture of their home country and their new country. This process is influenced and affected by those around them, such as peers and teachers (Zhao et al., 2017).

Guided by this theoretical perspective, Zhao et al. (2017) investigated how young newcomer and local Canadian students attending three Calgary high schools perceived and experienced intercultural peer relationships. The authors used the constructivist approach to grounded theory (CGT), a qualitative research design in which researchers use participants' own views to generate a theory of processes, actions, or interactions (Creswell, 2013). The conceptual

framework developed by Zhao et al. (2017) was used as a roadmap to guide the design, literature review, and data analysis process of this study.

Zhao et al. (2017) aimed to explore how participants' subjective meanings are negotiated in the context of intercultural peer relationships and the broader context of intercultural communication and understanding. This goal was consistent with the CGT's focus on the processes of interactions among individuals, the specific contexts in which people interact, and the cultural settings that influence individuals' meaning-making (Creswell, 2013). The CGT gave Zhao et al. (2017) the flexibility to explore the multilevel interacting factors that influence intercultural peer relationships, and to draw upon the cultural knowledge they gained from their cross-cultural research.

### **Focus of the Present Study and Research Questions**

In line with the inductive approach taken by Zhao et al.'s (2017) larger project to unearth the intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics that impact social interactions between newcomer and local students, the current study aimed to examine the challenges perceived by newcomer students when making friends with local students in Canadian high schools. My goal was to analyze students' views on these challenges and interpret them from my own perspective as an immigrant to Canada since I have had experience with the Canadian education system myself. I situated these views and my interpretations within the existing conceptual framework adopted from the larger project (Zhao et al., 2017). Based on my analysis of newcomers' experiences of forming friendships with local students and their perceptions of barriers, I will challenge the current conceptualizations of newcomer social integration in Canadian schools and broader society.

While social support and friendships are important for the healthy development of all adolescents (Chen & Graham, 2015), these factors are even more important for newcomer students in their transition and adjustment processes in a host country. Therefore, it is essential to understand the links between the developmental, social, cultural, and transitional challenges newcomer students face in making friends with peers in school (Chen & Graham, 2015; Mueller, 1980; Tsai, 2006). A gap remains in the current literature in identifying newcomer youths' needs within the sociocultural context of Canadian high schools. This study emphasized the importance of understanding newcomers' perspectives about the challenges they face in forming friendships with local students.

Understanding newcomer youths' experiences with intercultural friendships provides information regarding psychological and social challenges in the integration process that stem from cultural differences. One of the main practical goals of the study was to understand how existing definitions of social integration processes influence youths' well-being, sense of belonging, and overall adaptability. In previous research examining friendship development of local and newcomer adolescents, most of these youth were found to prefer same-group friendships over cross-group ones (Chan & Birman, 2009; Chen & Graham, 2015; Tsai, 2006). Evaluating this friendship preference in the integration process from the perspective of newcomer youth will inform existing programs on how to better help these youths with social interactions with local students. Given the importance of friendship to adolescent development and the challenges young newcomers face with the social integration process in Canadian high schools, it is surprising that so little is known about friendship formation from young newcomers' perspectives. Additionally, the concept of social integration itself is difficult to

conceptualize and operationalize, which makes it complicated to apply without falling into the trap of implying the assimilation of newcomers into the dominant culture.

The current thesis used data extracted from the larger project mentioned above (Zhao et al., 2017). The two projects shared similar overarching goals, each aiming to explore how newcomer students perceive intercultural friendship formation by identifying the multilevel interacting factors that influence peer relationship preferences (i.e., cross-cultural vs. same-cultural), and the factors that might contribute to these preferences. However, there were significant differences between the two projects with regards to their approaches. In Zhao et al.'s (2017) project, the authors developed a conceptual framework that described factors that promote or prevent intercultural friendship formation. The authors adopted a constructivist approach to grounded theory (CGT), in which a theory of processes, activities, or interactions is generated via the research using the perspectives of the individuals who participated in the study (Creswell, 2013). The CGT approach emphasizes individuals' beliefs, feelings, and assumptions in embedded networks and power hierarchies. In my analysis, I focused on identifying the recurrent themes that emerged from newcomers' perspectives about the challenges they face in forming intercultural friendships with local students. In light of these challenges, I reflected on the concept of social integration and its applicability to newcomer students. To achieve my thesis goal, which was slightly different from the larger project, I used a thematic analysis (TA) approach to guide data interpretation. Through its flexibility, TA allows the researcher to explore patterns of responses shared by participants to identify recurring themes of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Together with semi-structured interviews to elicit participants' stories, experiences, situations, and contexts, TA captured the common themes of newcomers' experiences with intercultural friendship formation in Canadian high schools. The theoretical and

epistemological autonomy that underpins TA's adaptability makes it possible for this methodology to accommodate a significant amount of variation in its application (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the current study, I considered TA a suitable data analysis approach to address the research questions because it offered a framework to extract meaning from participants' responses. The study aimed to explore newcomer students' lived experiences and present their unique stories; therefore, TA was deemed well suited to contextual data analysis. Additionally, as a graduate student, TA's flexibility aligned with my research experience and skills at this stage of my professional academic development, given the relatively large number of participant interviews included in this thesis.

Guided by the conceptual framework from the larger project by Zhao et al. (2017), the present study was designed to extend existing knowledge about the challenges faced by newcomer students' intercultural friendship formation in Canadian high schools. Additionally, the study has challenged the current conceptualizations of newcomer social integration in Canadian schools and broader society. In the current study, I posed two questions: (1) What do newcomers perceive as factors that hinder intercultural friendships with local students? (2) How should the notion of social integration be re-conceptualized based on newcomer youth's experiences?

### **Potential Contributions of the Study**

This study identifies various obstacles that impede the formation of intercultural connections between newcomer youth and local students. The obstacles were categorized as intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural context factors that influence intercultural friendships. Each level comprises many themes and subthemes of the prevalent patterns seen in the intercultural friendship experiences of newcomers. In addition, the section on findings illustrates

the strategies that newcomers use to establish social relationships with local students, as well as their ideas and recommendations regarding how local students, teachers, and schools might assist foster intercultural friendships. After identifying the recurrent obstacles newcomer students have while seeking to establish social engagement with local students, I utilized a critical approach to examine the applicability of the social integration concept from the newcomer students' perspectives, based on their shared experiences. Through the social interaction experiences of newcomers with local students that I examined, this study presents a critical review of the current implementation of social integration practices in schools. Social interaction and intercultural relationship experiences were the focus because they are excellent markers of the social integration process.

This study concludes by establishing a link between these main findings and previously published literature. This link attempts to establish a logical connection between academic research on the social integration of newcomers and the participants' shared lived experiences. Such a connection sheds light on gaps in Canadian educational and social institutions regarding the actual execution of the social integration process. The identification of gaps can guide policymakers in resolving the challenges faced by newcomer students, leading to the implementation of policies and processes that facilitate the integration of newcomer students. This study's findings also put into question the term *social integration*, which is currently used to describe the process of integrating newcomer students into their new environment. I also explore the potential implications of this study for interventions and policies at both the educational and institutional levels, and offer recommendations for how various educational and institutional entities may assist in facilitating the integration of newcomers into Canadian society. To

conclude, I highlight the limitations of this study and make suggestions for future research that might extend and build upon my findings.

## **Key Definitions**

### ***Newcomer/International/Immigrant Student***

There are many categories of immigrants based on the amount of time spent in Canada. According to Statistics Canada (2018), landed immigrants are categorized into three groups based on their length of stay in Canada: newcomers, recent immigrants, and established immigrants. The first category comprises landed immigrants who have been in Canada for less than 5 years. The second category includes recent immigrants who have stayed in Canada between 5 and 10 years. The last category is made up of established immigrants who have been in Canada for more than 10 years. The status of residency for individuals changes mainly based on how long they have stayed in Canada and their eligibility to gain Canadian citizenship or permanent residency. Such labels do not include cultural competency measurements for newcomers or their readiness or level of social integration into Canadian culture.

The term *newcomers* was chosen in this thesis to refer to newcomers, international students, landed immigrants, and refugees because it is an inclusive term. In school setting contexts, Oikonomidou (2018, p. 185) defined newcomers as individuals with “an outsider position in the social dynamics of school life as they often have phenotypical and linguistic characteristics that set them apart from native-born peer groups.” Based on Oikonomidou’s (2018) definition, the term *newcomer* is suitable because it focuses on the group’s social and cultural position rather than their legal and residency statuses, as suggested by Statistics Canada. Additionally, Zhao et al. (2017) decided to use the term *local* rather than *Canadian* in the original larger project when referring to the native-born students who participated in the project.

The justification included that the project was intended to understand the intercultural friendship formation dynamics from sociocultural perspectives rather than students' legal and citizenship descriptions. Moreover, although the study did not include any students with Indigenous backgrounds, the term *local* is more inclusive, especially when considering Indigenous students who might prefer not to be identified solely as Canadian and might rather identify with an Indigenous identity. Zhao et al.'s (2017) reasoning behind using these terms (*local* and *newcomer* vs. *Canadian* and *international* student) is very convincing and aligned with my personal views on social justice and equality. Therefore, I decided to use similar terms throughout this thesis.

### ***Intercultural Friendship***

Friendship formation plays a significant role in the life of those who migrate from their home countries, especially during the developmental stage in their lives. It is not only required to satisfy personal and emotional needs (Hendrickson et al., 2011), but research has also found that forming friendship relationships with host country students reduces newcomers' sense of homesickness that can develop due to losing social support from back home (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Although there is a large body of research that suggests same-ethnic friendships are more common than cross-ethnic ones (Bellmore et al., 2007; Echols & Graham, 2013; Hendrickson et al., 2011), when newcomer students arrive in their host countries, they tend to show desire to initiate connections with local students (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Moreover, intercultural friendships, if formed, have a positive impact on newcomer students' academic, social, and adjustment outcomes (Graham et al., 2014; Kawabata & Crick, 2008) However, research on the barriers that newcomers face when approaching local students to initiate social interaction is not

conclusive. Therefore, this study offers a deeper look into these barriers from newcomer students' own perspectives.

### ***Social Integration***

The literature contains numerous definitions of the term *social integration*, making it difficult to develop an operational definition (de Alcántara, 1995; Evans et al., 2020). This also makes it challenging to formulate a definition that adequately captures the experiences of the newcomer students who participated in this study. To some, the concept may represent having equal opportunities and being treated fairly. There is also the possibility that when equality is applied to everyone, diversity and individuality will be eradicated and uniformity will be imposed in their place (de Alcántara, 1995).

The concept of social integration can also be used to impartially describe the relationship dynamic between humans generally; in the case of newcomers and local students, this concept does not imply these relationships are negative or positive (de Alcántara, 1995). Another definition of integration of immigrant youths to new host countries is offered within the acculturation framework proposed by Berry (1997) and Berry et al. (2006). Berry and his co-authors suggested that peoples' acculturation processes tend to produce four distinct profiles: assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration. The author identified the integration profile when "both cultural maintenance and involvement with larger society are sought" (Berry et al., 2006, p. 306). Thus, there is no agreement on how to define the concept of social integration. Moreover, the concept itself is difficult to measure and operationalize (Jeannotte, 2008). Therefore, intercultural friendship was used as key indicator of successful social integration, as suggested by Reitz et al. (2009). This is because social integration can only be

achieved through meaningful social connection between individuals who, in this case, were newcomers and local students (Zhao et al., 2017).

### **Positionality**

I chose to focus on newcomer students because I personally relate to this group, as I have a lived experience as a newcomer to Canada several years ago. Reflecting on my personal motivations, my unique position as an immigrant and a professional provided me with the ability to personally relate to newcomers' experiences while also evaluating these experiences through a theoretical and scientific lens. I moved to Canada with my family as a landed immigrant later in my life. The settlement process was challenging, mainly due to cultural, religious, and social differences. I come from a collectivist culture where interconnectedness and intergroup relations play an important role in each member's life, such that individuals strongly rely on social support from family and friends (Mesquita, 2001). Moving to an individualistic culture that emphasizes individuals' goals and desires required me to become more independent, as I could not rely on social connections as much as I had been used to.

Although I arrived in Canada as an adult, I can relate to the experiences of youngsters since I brought my now 14-year-old daughter to this country when she was younger. Even though she has been exposed to several cultures at school, she is nonetheless impacted by Canada's predominant culture. My interest lies in gaining a deeper comprehension of the mechanisms behind the formation of friendships and other social ties among young newcomers. This knowledge will not only help immigrant students in Canada as a whole, but it will also enable me to better support my daughter in negotiating the complexities of establishing social bonds with her local peers.

As an immigrant who is now enrolled in postsecondary education in Canada, I am familiar with this country's educational system despite not having completed secondary school there. It is of interest to me to learn about the experiences of newcomers and to utilize my professional position to reflect the concerns and challenges faced by this marginalized and research-neglected population as they adjust and adapt to their new environments. In order to have a better understanding of how friendships develop among new students, one of my aims is to give voice to their experiences using my academic and professional abilities.

### **Overview of Thesis**

In the next chapter (Chapter 2), I offer a critique of existing scholarly literature pertaining to newcomer students' social integration into Canadian high schools, describe challenges and barriers to intercultural friendship formation, and explain the conceptual framework used to guide this study. In Chapter 3, the TA methodology and data analysis process is discussed. The findings of the study are presented and categorized into overarching factors, key themes, and subthemes in Chapter 4. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the findings, my perspectives and takes on the social integration challenges in Canadian high schools, and practical implications for school counsellors, psychologists, and mental health providers. Finally, I review possible limitations and suggest directions for future research paths.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature on social challenges facing young newcomers upon arrival to their host countries, especially in the context of school. The first section describes the social integration construct in relation to newcomers' experiences. Following this summary, I look at how the scholarly literature presents the barriers and challenges faced by newcomer students when navigating social interactions through friendship formation. I then present conceptual framework developed by Zhao et al. (2017) and discuss how it guided my analysis here. I conclude this chapter by highlighting the gaps and limitations in the existing academic literature pertaining to newcomers' social integration and intercultural friendship formation experiences, and outline how this study aimed to contribute to the larger body of literature by addressing this gap.

### **Newcomer “Social Integration”: What Does it Mean?**

When coming to a new country, newcomer students take on a huge burden: they are responsible for taking care of themselves and learning or excelling in a new language, all while navigating a new culture and traditions. A body of research on the social integration of newcomer students in their host countries reports that educational institutions, such as schools, play a fundamental role in this integration process (Lundberg, 2020; Ron-Balsera, 2015), not only because students spend large portion of their day at school, but also because they are influenced by their peers, the teaching methods of their teachers, and their schools' culture (Ron-Balsera, 2015). Therefore, building positive relationships with teachers and peers increases newcomer students' abilities to cope during their adjustment and settlement phase with various types of challenges, such as aggression, marginalization, and microaggression (Lundberg, 2020).

In the literature on immigrant social integration, the term *social integration* is used in multiple ways. For instance, it may describe the effort to incorporate minority groups into the social systems of the (mainly Western) host country. There are multiple terms used to describe the process of incorporating newcomers or other minority groups into host countries including *social cohesion*, *social inclusion*, and *social integration*. Sometimes these terms are used interchangeably with social integration, and other times in contrast to it (Evans et al., 2020). For example, *social cohesion* refers to an individual's attitudes and behaviours in relation to their membership within the host community (Friedkin, 2004). Another term used in the literature in relation to newcomers' migration is *social inclusion*. In an Australian study that followed immigrant students' settlement processes and access to social connections, Yates (2011) argued that social inclusion is conceptualized in terms of individuals' access to institutions, powers, and social networks, which results in enhanced English language proficiency and academic success. On the other hand, the social integration term has a broader focus beyond individuals where it focuses on the roles of national and educational institutions in facilitating the inclusion process (Evans et al., 2020). The term social integration is slightly preferred over other terms that describe the social experiences of minority groups with dominant sociocultural communities in host countries. This could be attributed to the fact that this term emphasizes the responsibilities of institutional, social, and educational structures in comparison to terms such as social cohesion and social inclusion, which put more emphasis on an individual's efforts (Evans et al., 2020). However, in a migration context, all three terms infer a negative view of the expected social interaction dynamic between newcomers and local individuals. This dynamic is characterized by placing more pressure on newcomers to conform to the dominant host country's culture and traditions (Cederberg, 2014; Evans et al., 2020). Unfortunately, this type of pressure faced by

newcomers when integrating into a new environment intensifies when language barriers are present (Jabeen et al., 2019).

### **Intercultural Friendships and Social Integration**

The Canadian economic system has benefited significantly from the contributions of newcomers and immigrants over the years (Picot, 2008). Moreover, newcomer students, with their cultural diversity, enrich the educational experiences of local students. In return, newcomer students are able to broaden their perspectives on the world through interactions with students from the host country as well as with other newcomer students (Gareis, 2012). Forming intercultural friendships with local students has been found to be a key predictor of satisfaction among newcomer students and in particular, meaningful connections made through intercultural friendships boost the sense of satisfaction among newcomers (Gareis, 2012). Intercultural friendship offers additional benefits. In racially and ethnically diverse school settings, intercultural friendships were found to have a positive impact on newcomers' academic performance, as well as reducing their stress levels and improving the adjustment process (Gareis, 2012; Graham et al., 2014; Kawabata & Crick, 2008). The benefits of reciprocated friendships between minority youths and local youths extend to promoting empathy, leadership skills, and prosocial activities (Kawabata & Crick, 2008).

Despite these benefits, it is not easy for newcomer youth to form or initiate friendships with local students. The reasons could be attributed to individual factors related to newcomers' social skills and local students' level of interest in forming relationships, or could go beyond the individual level and relate to structural factors such as immigration policies and the implications of such policies. For the purpose of this review, I mainly focus on interpersonal concerns related to intercultural friendship formation and social integration. However, in the following section, I

briefly discuss an analytical report published by Statistics Canada (Picot, 2008) with respect to the effect of immigration on social cohesion in Canada because I believe some of the findings relate directly to this thesis.

### **Canadian Approaches to Immigrant Social Integration**

Even in countries such as Canada, which is considered “the founder of multiculturalism as formal government policy” (Reitz, 2009, p. 1), whether immigration is a threat to national identity and social cohesion remains a contested issue. As a response to growing immigration and multiculturalism, there has been an increased interest in examining the effect of immigration on social cohesion in Canada (Picot, 2008). In his report, Picot (2008) noted a lack of well-established research on the impact of immigration on the Canadian social fabric. However, he mentioned several reasons why immigration “has had relatively little negative effect on social cohesion in Canada” (p. 7). The reasons included: (a) Canada accommodates more than one single national identity, including English and French; (b) Canada is considered to be the land of immigration; (c) there are high educational levels among newcomers; (d) immigration is encouraged by political parties due to labour shortages; (e) newcomers have a high level of civic engagement; (f) there is racial diversity among newcomers; and (g) there are few illegal immigration issues (Picot, 2008). The report described two approaches a government could take to increase social cohesion and decrease the negative impacts of immigration. The first approach is to embrace diversity and cultural differences, and create space for marginalized groups to celebrate their own unique cultures. The second approach, my main area of interest, is to focus on social integration and assimilation. Picot (2008) suggested that both approaches could be adopted simultaneously. However, the two approaches seem to contradict each other: whereas the first focuses on keeping diversity, the second aims to decrease diversity through assimilation.

A resolution offered in the report was to shift between the two approaches, but the author did not explain how that could be implemented. Moreover, the suggestion of maintaining both approaches indicates that despite the lack of any serious negative effect of immigration on the Canadian social fabric, there is governmental support for building a common national identity through assimilating newcomers into the dominant Western culture of Canadian society. The findings from the report raise a question about the effective role that policy makers are playing in supporting and influencing integration initiatives and programs at educational and institutional levels. This study contributes newcomers' perspectives and lived experiences about social integration into Canadian high schools, which are important to inform the design of such programs. Community-based social integration programs that are guided by the government's mixed approach to social integration, in which it views assimilating newcomers and creating a national identity as plausible, are related to the second question presented in this study: How is social integration conceptualized based on newcomers' experiences?

Berry's (1997; Berry et al., 2006) acculturation framework mentioned in the previous chapter divides newcomers into four categories based on how they are seeking to acculturate. *Assimilation* is one of the four categories, which Berry et al. (2006, p. 306) described as "the way when there is little interest in cultural maintenance combined with a preference for interacting with the larger society." The acculturation framework focuses mainly on individual factors, such as the desire to maintain heritage and culture, and does not account for systemic factors such as government policies and community-based programs and strategies. Therefore, the second question posed by this study focused on the experiences of newcomer students with intercultural friendship to shed light on the difference between assimilation and integration, and to deepen our understanding of the social interaction dynamics between newcomer and local students.

## **Challenges and Barriers to Social Integration and Friendship Formation**

Newcomer students develop their primary understanding of the social world in their birth country before moving to a host country (Oikonomidou, 2018). This understanding is based on their social status in their native environment, where they are most likely a cultural and/or ethnic majority (Oikonomidou, 2018). Moving to a new society, culture, and school environment challenges previous conceptualizations of the socialization process, which can lead newcomer students to reflect on the transformation that has changed their social location and available social support (Oikonomidou, 2018; Rong & Preissle, 2008). This is in addition to navigating the settlement process of their new environment, which includes learning the host country's language, establishing social connections with other newcomers and local peers in schools, and in some cases, finding and adapting to host families.

Language is one of the major factors that might affect newcomer students' social integration process, becoming for some a roadblock that prevents social interaction and communication. While this barrier is common among all newcomers who do not speak a host country's official language, it acquires greater complexity in the case of students. Students need language proficiency for academic learning, communicating with peers, and social integration into new school environments. Due to their regular attendance at schools and other academic institutions, immigrant children and adolescents are expected to learn the language of the host nation faster than their parents. However, during the language acquisition process, language barriers can cause difficulties in social interactions with peers, leading to rejection and social isolation (Beißert et al., 2019). English language acquisition is needed for newcomer students to better communicate with their peers, and unfortunately, language proficiency is one of the main barriers that language-minority students face (Drake, 2014).

Knowledge of language can facilitate communication, social acceptance, and integration. In addition, previous studies have indicated that language development consists of a social interaction component in addition to the individual learning process (Drake, 2014). Therefore, newcomer students face the paradox of the necessity to learn English for academic attainment and the hesitation of communicating with local students, which limits their English language development. To learn a new language, one needs to interact with others and communicate verbally to improve speaking and conversational skills. Interpersonal skills are vital for both newcomers and local students, because these skills determine the way they think about and interact with each other, and how each group perceives the other. However, newcomer students hesitate to interact and communicate with local students. The way newcomer students perceive local students may act as another barrier, specifically in terms of perceived maturity and power dynamics between the two groups. Because local students may start to work, drive, and drink alcohol earlier compared to newcomer students, newcomer students may perceive themselves as less mature and hence less powerful in comparison to their local counterparts. Unfortunately, there is very little literature on the perception of maturity and meaning-making of newcomer students, and how they perceive their own maturity and reflect on their personal growth after the immigration experience.

Finally, the structure of schools may also act as a barrier to newcomer students' social integration. Previous studies have shown that certain divisions in schools reflect social forces such as socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, language, and the status of newcomers (Drake, 2014; Oikonomidou, 2018; Rude & Herda, 2010). Most importantly, such division is evident in assigning newcomer students to dedicated English as a second language (ESL) classes. Despite the positive elements of such classes, including accelerated language learning and overall

academic support to meet individualized learning needs, ESL classes serve as an additional barrier that socially excludes newcomer students from their peers. This concept of segregation prevails, which allows newcomer students access only to certain spaces and, in turn, prevents their social integration into Canadian schools. On the other hand, being in ESL classes for a longer time during the school day, especially at the beginning of the learning process, increases the chance of meeting other newcomer students and hence, offers a higher chance of same-cultural friendship formation.

### **Friendship Patterns (Cross-Ethnic vs. Same-Ethnic Relationships)**

A growing body of research has documented the important role friendships play in providing a healthy adjustment throughout the course of one's life, especially in early adolescence. Adolescents mostly form friendships in school, which is where they spend the most time with peers (Chen & Graham, 2015; Rude & Herda, 2010; Turner & Cameron, 2016). With the growing ethnic diversity in public schools, researchers have begun to focus on friendship formation patterns. Researchers have also begun to distinguish between same- and intercultural friendships to examine the unique patterns and benefits of each type of relationship (Chen & Graham, 2015). For example, research has shown that intercultural friendships are associated with better perceived social competence, multicultural sensitivity, and leadership characteristics (Hunter & Elias, 1999). Moreover, individuals in intercultural friendships have fewer feelings of vulnerability when at school (Graham et al., 2014).

Mueller (1980) and Tsai (2006) introduced the analytical concept of social networks, which describes the interpersonal linkages in social systems. The concept of a social network has two primary dimensions: structural and interactional. Components of the structural dimension include relationship type, proximity, and homogeneity. The interactional dimension encompasses

a person's relationship traits, such as reciprocity, durability, and multiplexity (Mueller, 1980; Tsai, 2006). There are three types of social networks based on these two primary dimensions: first order, second order, and extended (Mueller, 1980). First-order networks include connections with family, friends, and neighbors. Second order networks are comprised of connections established with others through first order connections. Lastly, the extended network forms with the larger population through second order connections (Mueller, 1980).

In addition to social network formation, it is essential to comprehend the process of friendship formation. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of literature on friendship formation in general, and even less for newcomer youth students. Existing research on friendships between children in ethnically diverse schools has revealed preferences for same-ethnicity friends despite the availability of peers of other ethnicities (Echols & Graham, 2013). Two general principles governing the formation of interethnic friendships have been deduced from prior research. The first principle is *homophily*, which describes the tendency for people to seek out or be attracted to those who are similar to themselves (Echols & Graham, 2013). The second principle is *propinquity*, which states that individuals are more likely to form relationships with those who are nearby (Mouw & Entwisle, 2006). Homophily is consistent with the proverb “birds of a feather flock together” and suggests that similar individuals are more likely to interact than dissimilar ones. Propinquity, on the other hand, necessitates physical proximity, where individuals come into frequent contact and, as a result, become more acquainted with one another, which is the basis for friendship. Understanding these two social phenomena is essential to this research because the formation of friendships depends on the identification of shared interests and common values, as well as the availability to connect with others who share these characteristics.

## Cultural Differences in Adolescent Relationships

The term *culture* refers to a wide range of aspects of a person's life, including their language, religion, traditions, arts, patterns of behavior and social interaction, and social customs. Different people establish connections with their social environments in various ways; some form interdependent relationships while others engage independently. Individualism and collectivism are two of the most frequent phrases that are used to describe individuals' inclinations in how they act in relation to or around other people. It is important to start with a clear definition of the terms *individualism* and *collectivism*, and then examine the impact of these cultural constructs on friendship formation dynamics and newcomer students' perceptions of local students. In his book, Triandis (2018) offered an extensive definition for both terms:

Collectivism may be initially defined as a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives (family, co-workers, tribe, nation); are primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by, those collectives; are willing to give priority to the goals of these collectives over their own personal goals; and emphasize their connectedness to members of these collectives. A preliminary definition of individualism is a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives; are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the contracts they have established with others; give priority to their personal goals over the goals of others; and emphasize rational analyses of the advantages and disadvantages to associating with others. (p. 2)

To evaluate how culture affects the development of friendships, we must first identify the cultural differences between local and newcomer students (Triandis et al., 1988). As indicated by the definitions of individualism and collectivism, individualistic cultures, in contrast to

collectivist cultures, place a greater emphasis on the rights of individuals than they do on the responsibilities of individuals, while simultaneously promoting personal interests such as autonomy, privacy, independence, and individual identity. On the other side, collectivist societies place more emphasis on interdependence and connectivity, less privacy, and the superiority of the demands of the collective above those of the individual (Darwish & Huber, 2003).

Understandably, individuals from collectivist and individualist societies follow different norms in social interactions. For example, what happens when they are first engaged in intercultural social interactions? It would be difficult for a newcomer who comes from a culture that emphasizes interdependence to make friends in a culture that emphasizes independence. Therefore, examining the challenges around friendship formation from newcomer students' perspectives must involve the individualistic context of Canadian culture and the collectivistic context of many non-Western newcomers. Similarly for the social integration concept, it is crucial to understand to what extent cultural differences play into the integration process. For example, in some cultures, asking for help is expected and normalized, while in other cultures, taking a passive stance is a sign of politeness and respect. Understanding within and between cultures will shed light on the role cultural differences play in creating a gap between students with respect to intercultural friendships.

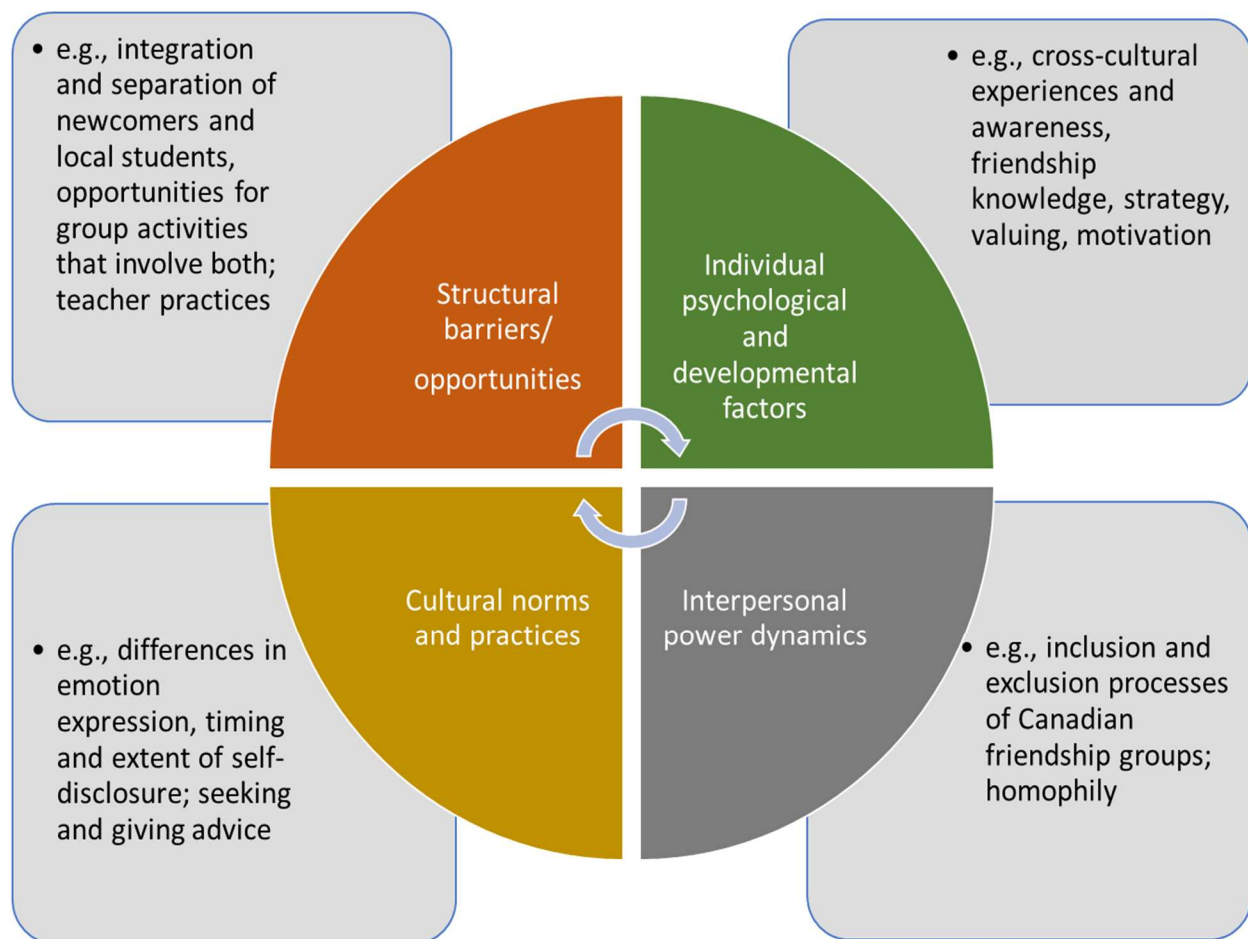
Overall, understanding newcomer students' experiences with peer interactions in Canadian high schools will have many benefits. Newcomer students spend most of their time in school, where they are expected to engage with their classmates. Such contact between newcomers and local students are not only necessary for the social integration of newcomer students into Canadian schools, but also boosts their academic success (Delgado et al., 2015). By examining newcomer students' own perspectives, this study offers information that can help

researchers, psychologists, and mental health workers promote positive social outcomes for newcomer students.

## Chapter 3: Research Methods

### Conceptual Framework Guiding the Present Study

My analysis is based on data from a larger project by Zhao et al. (2017) that investigated the perceptions of newcomer and local students in intercultural social interaction. To capture the experiences of newcomer and local students with intercultural friendships, the authors of the original research used a grounded-theory method to outline the multi-level elements that may impede or aid the establishment of intercultural friendships (Zhao et al., 2017). The conceptual framework for the study, which was constructed by the authors of the original research, is divided into four primary domains (see Figure 1). The first domain includes individual psychological and developmental factors that impede or encourage intercultural friendships such as personality, English language fluency, experiences with cross-cultural interactions, and to what extent participants value these interactions. The second domain of the conceptual framework includes the interpersonal power dynamics at play in the formation, or absence, of intercultural friendships. This includes inclusion and exclusion from friendship groups (e.g., cliques) along with other social phenomena such as homophily and propinquity. The third domain involves structural or institutional factors that prevent or encourage friendship formation such as physical separation in school (e.g., ESL classes). The final domain of the conceptual framework addresses the cultural norms and practices that may act as barriers or facilitators of intercultural friendship formation. These practices include differences in emotional expression, academic and family pressures, expectations toward adolescent independence, and self-disclosure (Zhao et al., 2017).

**Figure 1***Conceptual Framework of Intercultural Friendship Formation Influencing Factors*

I used this conceptual framework as a guide for my initial analysis in order to comprehensively explore the multi-level factors that influence newcomer students' experiences with intercultural peer interactions in Canadian schools. This allowed me to organize data into categories and a meaningful structure, which was necessary for the study. On the other hand, within the confines of this framework, I adopted an inductive strategy for determining the themes that emerged from the data (see Chapter 4). In the following section, I begin by discussing how

the data from the first project was gathered, as well as the demographics of the individuals who provided the data.

## **Participants and Recruitment Information**

This study used data that is part of an existing project by Zhao et al. (2017) that is supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant. The larger project aims to investigate how young newcomers (i.e., immigrants, refugees, and international students) and local Canadian students perceive and experience intercultural peer relationships. All students were recruited from three high schools in Calgary, Alberta for in-depth interviews. The total number of students who participated was approximately 30 newcomers and 30 local students (i.e., born in Canada or came to the country before kindergarten).

The participating schools were identified through consultation meetings with the program coordinators at the Calgary Board of Education's Global Learning Services who oversee the administration of academic and support programs in high schools. The research team had established a partnership with Global Learning Services during a previously conducted pilot study, and the topic of the original research was developed in consultation with them. As an exploratory qualitative study, the research team deliberately recruited newcomers (i.e., international students, new immigrants, and refugees) who spoke English and had a variety of countries of origin. Local students were also from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

For this thesis, I analyzed a portion of the larger data set with a specific focus on newcomer students in my aim to understand their experiences and perceptions of intercultural relationships, especially friendships. Newcomer students were chosen as the population to study as newcomers occupy, by definition, a position of outsider in the social dynamics of school life. This is due to the fact that they often exhibit phenotypical and linguistic features that distinguish them from their native-born classmates (Oikonomidou, 2018). The newcomer community resonated with me since I, too, was a newbie to Canada not too long ago. Though I did not

complete my secondary education in Canada, I have had some exposure to the country's higher education system via my own postsecondary studies. I wanted to find out more about the challenges experienced by immigrants and use my position as a professional to speak for the needs of this underrepresented population as they navigate the complexities of acculturation, integration, and/or assimilation processes. Despite the immigration, adjustment process, and education experiences I have in common with the research participants, it was important for me to remain aware of my assumptions and understandings to maintain objectivity when reading and analyzing participants' interviews.

The data I used were 19 interviews with newcomer students, which had audio recordings and transcripts. A sample size of 19 is considered adequate for conducting thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although the original research team (Zhao et al., 2017) tried to balance the numbers of boys and girls in the full sample, it was harder to recruit boys and they had an overall majority of female participants. In the current study, all 19 participants were female.

### **Participant Demographics**

Nineteen participants' interviews were included in this study. They were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. All participants identified as newcomers to Canada and were from wide-ranging sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds (i.e., geographically from regions such as East Asia, South Asia, Africa, Europe, South America, and the Middle East). All participants spoke English as a non-native language, and some were more fluent than others. All interviews included in this study were from newcomer girls (grades 10–12), eight of whom resided with host families, ten of whom resided with their own parents, and one not specified. All host families used English as the main language except for one family who spoke mostly

French. All interviews took place during regular school hours at the designated high school where each student was enrolled.

The interviews were guided by open-ended questions to elicit stories about context, scenes, situations, actions, and conditions (Charmaz, 2006). Each interview started with broad questions, such as “How do you perceive relationships between new students from other countries and local students in your school?” The interviewer then asked follow-up questions, such as “What happened?” and “What did you do in that situation?” (See the Appendix for a full list of interview questions.) The interviewer also explored how the students perceived friendship groups among local students, and how social inclusion and exclusion processes affected the way newcomers made friends with local students.

Next, the interview tapped into participants’ friendship-related beliefs and experiences. Questions focused on six issues: friendship formation, closeness and reciprocity, trust and intimacy, competition and jealousy, conflict resolution, and friendship termination. These questions were originally from Selman’s (1980) social cognition research methods. In this project, the research team modified Selman’s (1980) interview protocol to include questions about participants’ experiences of these friendship issues (Zhao, 2015; Zhao & Gao, 2014). Finally, participants were asked for their recommendations for dealing with these issues.

### **The Present Study: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis**

To address my research questions, I conducted a qualitative thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017). A qualitative method is appropriate for extending one’s understanding of psychological occurrences, experiences, and other phenomena, as well as for increasing one’s level of awareness of these phenomena (Ponterotto, 2005). By concentrating on how participants interpret social and cultural traditions, it gives voice to their distinctive experiences and

viewpoints (McLeod, 2001). Therefore, a qualitative approach is suitable to study the experiences and perspectives of newcomer students' friendships with local students.

A qualitative approach to thematic analysis (TA) seeks to find both the explicit and implicit concepts that are shared by the participants in the study, as opposed to merely focusing on participants' explicit remarks or opinions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, using TA helps researchers capture the complexity of participant experiences to spot prevailing meaning patterns (Guest et al., 2012). Furthermore, unlike other conventional theoretical and epistemological perspectives with specific methodological applications, TA provides a great deal of methodological flexibility. Overall, TA is a versatile and valuable research instrument that generates rich, detailed, and intricate data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clarke (2006) have argued that TA is a foundational method that researchers should be familiar with since it is a helpful core skill for performing qualitative analysis irrespective of epistemological and ontological positions. Even though some researchers consider thematic coding part of the analysis process within all major analytic traditions (e.g., grounded theory; Rayan & Bernard, 2000), Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that TA should be considered a stand-alone method that follows certain steps. In the current research, I applied TA as a method in its own right and followed Terry et al.'s (2017) six phases of TA application, which will be discussed in the Data Analysis section of this chapter.

The data analysis involved an iterative procedure consisting of listening to the interview audio recordings and reading the interview transcripts, doing analysis and coding, aggregating codes into themes, and summarizing the most prominent items noticed through theme recognition. I processed the data using the following six phases suggested by Terry et al. (2017):

(a) familiarization; (b) codes generation; (c) themes construction and development; (d) reviewing potential themes; (e) defining themes; and (f) writing final findings.

During the familiarization phase, I engaged with the data to get a general understanding of what it entailed. The original project's data was extensive and included a broad spectrum of aspects, including newcomers' definitions of friendship, how they developed friendships, foundations of trust in friendships, interpersonal dominance, as well as friendship termination. Engaging with the data gave me the opportunity to evaluate the interviewers' questions and the overall effectiveness of the data gathering procedure. For instance, I was able to verify that all interviews had very comparable structures, such as the phrasing and sequencing of the questions, which offered consistency.

In the process of getting familiar with the data, I took detailed notes to record my ideas and observations. This involved both reading the transcripts and listening to the audio recordings. Initially, I focused on newcomer students' perspectives on the existence of cliques, which are defined as "small group[s] with circumscribed membership that share a friendship orientation" (Brown & Klute, 2003, p. 331). I was interested in examining cliques as a social phenomenon in Canadian high schools. However, I soon decided to switch the study focus to the newcomer students' perspectives on the social integration process and their experiences with intercultural friendships in Canadian high schools. This method of shifting subjects increased my familiarity with the data substantially. I gained a solid understanding of the whole data set, which helped me generate codes early in the data analysis process.

The next phase was code generation, which involved creating labels for specific segments of participants' responses to capture the meaning. This initial coding method had a wide scope and contained portions of coding that were extraneous to my study topics. Labeling segments

allowed me to subsequently compare all codes created throughout the data set. I next did the secondary phase of focused coding, which entailed selecting the codes that were relevant to my research objectives (Terry et al., 2017).

I conducted the coding for each transcript. A portion of the interview transcripts had been partly coded for the original study by other academics at an earlier point in time. This earlier coding was used to verify the inter-reliability of the data, and some of the codes I created were compatible with the codes developed by the other researchers. This allowed for the evaluation of the data's validity.

Next, I used the codes I developed to construct themes and patterns that were guided by the research questions. After this theme development phase, I analyzed themes in relation to one another to identify the most prevalent meanings. This enabled me to merge and cluster codes with similar meanings into useful, overarching groups. When feasible, I deconstructed each theme into smaller subthemes, which I tied to both the overarching category and other subthemes. As part of my examination of the themes, I ensured that they were different but interrelated, as well as relevant to the major ideas and research objectives. I then established the themes' definitions to guarantee their clarity and consistency, and constructed a coherent narrative based on the data. The findings are described in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

In this chapter, I present the findings of the study, which examined the following questions: (1) What do newcomers perceive as factors that hinder intercultural friendships with local students? (2) How is social integration conceptualized based on newcomers' experiences? I start this chapter by providing an overview of the overarching categories, themes, and subthemes developed through the data analysis stage. I then present a description for each category, theme, and subtheme, supported by participant quotes to illustrate and enrich the meaning of the presented themes. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the privacy of the participants. Each participant's home country and grade will be stated.

### **Overview of Categories, Themes, and Subthemes**

Guided by the conceptual framework developed by Zhao et al. (2017), my analysis of the interview data generated four overarching categories, into which the themes and subthemes were grouped (Table 1). The first overarching category is intrapersonal factors, which describe factors within the individual. The second category is interpersonal and adjustment factors, which happen within the context of relationships and through the process of adjusting to a new social and cultural environment. The third category is structural factors, which help or hinder intercultural friendships. The fourth category represents newcomer students' strategies of elements that facilitate intercultural friendship formation processes with local students. In this category, newcomer students' suggestions were grouped under four themes: (a) newcomers' learned strategies; (b) local students; (c) teachers; and (d) school administration. Overall, there were 11 emergent themes and 8 subthemes produced by the analysis.

**Table 1***Summary of Overarching Categories, Themes, and Subthemes*

Overarching category	Theme	Subtheme
Intrapersonal factors	English language insufficiency	Assume local students are bored due to newcomers' limited English  Being in ESL classes: no fear of embarrassment with same-level English speakers
	Personality shifts	
Interpersonal factors	Change in social supports: relationships with host families	
	Perceptions of local students' and teachers' attitudes: bullying, discrimination, and Islamophobia	
	Friendship group dynamics: cliques	
	Cultural differences in self-expression and social norms	Differences in thoughts, beliefs, and self-expression  Homophily: shared interests, stories, and cultural values  Propinquity: physical proximity  Cultural shock  Differences in communication style  Differences in perception of maturity
Structural factors	Limited opportunities for social interactions: ESL classes	

Newcomers' strategies	Strategies learned: initiate connections, perspective-taking, and shared interests
	Suggestions for local students: initiate connections and discussions about culture
	Suggestions for teachers: facilitate introductions and social gatherings
	Suggestions for school administration: create social interaction opportunities and provide cultural education

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### ***Intrapersonal Factors***

This category refers to factors related directly to students' own selves. Each newcomer student's experience was unique and related to many factors within and outside their life circumstances. Themes presented in this category are related to intrapersonal factors that participants said impacted their ability to form intercultural friendships and included the effect of language inadequacy on social interactions as well as personality shifts they experienced as a result of transitioning to Canada. The experiences reflected in the following themes are closely tied to the barriers perceived by newcomer students when attempting to initiate social connections with local students. This category of themes is focused on factors related directly to newcomer students themselves, whereas those pertaining to relationships with others are addressed in the interpersonal factor category.

**English Language Insufficiency.** When asked about the main challenges they faced coming to Canada, the majority of newcomers cited English language insufficiency as the most difficult one, along with cultural differences. It was easier to become friends with other newcomer students who have many characteristics in common with them such as being new to the country, holding similar cultural values (e.g., collectivism), and most importantly, lacking English proficiency. Struggle with the English language was the theme most frequently experienced by participants. The majority of students struggled with expressing themselves, sharing their thoughts, explaining ideas, and overall communicating in English. This led to difficulties in social interactions with local students. For example, Hanwen (China, grade 12) stated:

I think my language proficiency is still not like that good. So a lot of times I find difficulties in expressing myself. It's fine if we just talk about basic things, like asking some questions or yeah, stuff like that.

Meaningful discussions are needed for friendships to develop, which language limitations might not support in the early stages of a newcomer's learning path. In Hanwen's case, it is evident that language insufficiency limited the options of topics that she could discuss with local students. This limitation keeps relationship between newcomer and local students at a surface level.

***Assumption That Local Students are Bored.*** While newcomer students reported that being insufficient in the English language was a barrier to establishing connections with local students, they also reported feeling comfortable with other newcomers and ESL speakers despite English language inadequacy still being a factor in such interactions. Some participants communicated that the reason they did not consider English insufficiency to be a barrier with fellow newcomers was because they felt local students lacked patience to listen to them and

perceived them as boring, whereas other newcomer students did not. For example, Amelle (China, grade 11) stated:

Well, at first my English [English] wasn't very good, so that's like the biggest problem.

The local students, they didn't have the patience to even let me finish my sentence. Yeah, so they would be like interrupting all the time and after a brief conversation they will find this person is so boring. And they'll be like: I want to talk to someone else.

In addition, Hue (Vietnam, grade 11) shared her perspective on how she felt local students lacked interest in listening to her and how she perceived this lack of interest:

Um, we still trying to talk with Canadian people because our language and we, like I don't know, I like sometime I wanna talk with Canadian student but I am not sure what I want to talk with them and maybe they don't want to listen my story. [laughs.] And maybe they don't understand.

Hue highlighted a crucial point that I elaborate on in the Discussion chapter: the effort newcomer students expend connecting with their local counterparts despite language limitations. Newcomer students perceive that they hold more responsibility in initiating social interactions with local students. Moreover, the quotes from Amelle and Hue communicate the peer rejection newcomers experience while trying to connect with locals in their active attempts to integrate into the social life of their schools.

***Being in ESL Classes: No Fear of Embarrassment with Same-Level English Speakers.***

Newcomer students mentioned that because fellow newcomers acquire similar levels of English proficiency and tend to make similar mistakes, they felt less embarrassed than when talking to local students. For example, Juliana (Brazil, grade 11) noted:

Because I think they are having the same experience as you. So they kind of understand you. Like I don't speak English; English is my second language, so I make some mistakes. And international students do mistakes too, so I think we can like—we learn with our mistakes. So I think it's good. Like if I make a mistake with some international student, I won't be like oh, I'm sorry. I will be like okay, so let's try again. Because like Canadians speak English, so they know the language very well and better than me.

Another newcomer student, Tsomo (India, grade 10) reported:

Here in ESL class, it was like all of them were just like you or better than you but not that much. Yeah, it's kind of like all of them are same level so it actually makes you comfortable. So that's the reason that I actually got more open or something.

In these excerpts, Juliana and Tsomo stressed their feelings of power equality when they were around other newcomer students. Practicing the English language with individuals who have similar proficiency was less stressful since it did not cause embarrassment if mistakes were made.

**Personality Shifts.** Participants reported observations of their own personality shifts that occurred with the relocation process. Being a newcomer often requires rebuilding social capital and/or adapting to adjustment needs, and participants highlighted changes that occurred in their social status, personality traits, and/or social connections that influenced their confidence and made it more difficult to open up to others. Tsomo (India, grade 10) said that she became less confident after she moved to Canada due to her lack of English language skills: “Yeah, I change really different person because in my country I just love to talk and have a conversation with other, but here I feel kind of shy or not confident, yeah, like that.” Moreover, Lily (China, grade 10) stated that lacking some social skills (e.g., openness, confidence, popularity) prevented her

from engaging in school activities. As such, she missed social interaction opportunities with local students: “But I don’t know how to solve that because we really don’t have skills to, and we maybe we want to join the choir club and we don’t sing, but I don’t know how to solve the problem.”

In contrast, some newcomer students found moving to Canada was an opportunity to explore new social realms by experimenting with and expanding on their social skills. For instance, April (Mexico, grade 12) reported:

Before coming here, I was really shy, but after I did this online school, I feel the need to like talk to people. So like that’s why when I came here, it’s like everybody I saw, like, I didn’t care if they were willing to talk to me or not. I was just, like, I went up to them and hey, and started talking to them, you know? So I think that’s something that I’m, like, open and that I can just walk up to people and talk to them and they’re just, like, what are you doing? But I don’t care, and I’m just talking to them, and then that’s how I’m starting to make friends.

Despite a common experience of struggling to speak English, participants differed in terms of personality. There was a group who maintained and used their intrinsic personality to aid in establishing connections with local students and smooth the integration process in their new environment. Nicole (Vietnam, grade 11), for example, expressed greater ease communicating with locals because of her outgoing personality:

Yeah, actually, because I am, I am kind of an outgoing person, so it’s maybe it’s easier for me to make friends to immerse myself into kind of Canadian environment. And, like, I think that the people here is really friendly. So it’s not really hard to make friends.

Here, Nicole identified her personality as a strength in the Canadian context, implying that it might allow her to both make friends more easily and adapt to the cultural environment.

Additionally, Nicole's perception that local people are "really friendly" laid the groundwork for social interactions because she was open to receiving and welcoming efforts by local students to establish friendship.

### ***Interpersonal Factors***

Interpersonal factors include elements that impact the relationship formation between newcomer and local students. Newcomers often share the feeling of homesickness and a need for belonging, and tend to gravitate toward each other to meet their belonging, adjustment and relational needs. Adjustment factors refer to the components required for individuals to acquire knowledge, skills, and resources to cope with change (Ramsay et al., 1999), and may include a changing social support system.

**Change in Social Supports: Relationships with Host Families.** In addition to language issues and cultural differences, moving to a new country usually comes with challenges such as loss of social ties (especially in the case of students) and/or difficulties in communicating with families and friends back home due to time zone differences. Therefore, host families play an important role for students who come to Canada by themselves. For participants, having a supportive and welcoming relationship with host families had a positive impact on their overall well-being facilitated friendships with local individuals. This occurred through afterschool activities and through the extended social circles of the host families. April (Mexico, grade 12) considered her host family "like a second family." Juliana (Brazil, grade 11), however, did not have a successful relationship with her first host family, an experience she shared with another

newcomer student placed with the same family. She switched host families and ended up having a more supportive relationship with her second host family:

Like, I had some troubles with my first host family. So, at first I live with a German girl. She was having the same problems as me because she lived with me at the same house. So we used to talk a lot. Like, [I] cried and she cried, and we support each other. And then, like, I have my custodian [of the second host family] and she's from Canada Home Stay and I used to e-mail her, like send texts, call her, and tell my problems.

**Perceptions of Local Students' and Teachers' Attitudes: Bullying, Discrimination, and Islamophobia.** Participants discussed some negative experiences they had encountered with both local students as well as teachers. Newcomer students considered such negative experiences (e.g., bullying, discrimination, and Islamophobia) to be hindering social connections with other peers and teachers. In ESL classes, linguistic practice is useful for language development, but more importantly, access to such practice in a safe environment allows for students to interact with one another in a respectful and meaningful way. Newcomer students identified the challenges they faced with the attitudes of some local students who bullied them. For example, Laila (Egypt, grade 12) was bullied by local students in the lunchroom because her food was not recognized by local students:

I think it all started when I'd bring food that they didn't like. Like, you know in our culture, we eat like kidneys or like cow heart or whatever, and they'd always say that's so disgusting, and like, I think that's how it started. And yeah, they'd throw like their little goldfish [crackers] at me. Yeah, I was an outcast.

Zeinab (Turkey, grade 12) also spoke about an incident of bullying she encountered when a local student made a comment about her English accent:

She was always like, “Your accent is so funny” and all that. But I was like, “It’s normal,” ‘cause I, I grew up in a country and, like, with Turkish people, so I don’t speak, like, I never learned English there. They kept like making fun of my English and like more and more, and after that, like, I don’t really care about my accent anymore, but at that time, I really felt so bad, and I didn’t wanna talk to anyone. Like literally anyone. Even with my teachers when, when like I wanted to put my hand up.

The experience that Zeinab (Turkey, grade 12) went through sheds light on the profound social and psychological effects that a traumatic incident may have. In addition, this demonstrated that she blamed herself for not being able to speak English well enough, despite the fact that there was a reasonable explanation as to why she did not have sufficient English fluency.

Another student who was also bullied as a newcomer, Pema (India, grade 12), said that local students had a tendency to harass newcomers whenever they were in the same class together:

And ah, in ESL, it was I have so many ESL student, and in my math class, I think there is a few ESL student and most of them is Canadian student. So, from that what I also, also is, they are naughty and they, they don’t respect to the ESL student. Like it’s kind of bullying, I saw that they are bullying to the ESL students, right. Like make fun of he or her. I’ve seen that in my math class.

Newcomer students also experienced discrimination due to their cultural and religious differences. For example, Aya (Syria, grade 12) shared her experience of local students’ attitudes toward her hijab. She said:

When I came here, I meet somebody, he said to me he think the people that wear hijab, they’re like is a danger people...

[Investigator asks] Danger people?

[Aya replies] Yeah, danger people, people like ISIS or Taliban or something. I said “No, not us, is not Islam.” I try explain to him what we are and what we think and we are like you are, human.

Aya’s experience with Islamophobia reveals multiple points. In addition to illustrating the stress of being an ethnic/religious minority individual encountering stereotyping, this quote shows how negative discourse is used to label newcomers and apply social pressure that forces them to defend themselves in order to correct uninformed and harmful opinions such as “all Muslims are terrorists” or “all immigrants are on welfare.” This is what Aya did, as shown in her response.

Aya shared the rest of this experience:

It’s just so different, but we understand. Yeah, and after he [inaudible word] to another people, and they would come to us and try speak to us more and understand, take more idea. After they [say] “Oh, it’s nice, and be friends.”

Although Aya's experience resulted in a positive outcome, as she clarified the misconceptions about Islam and became friends with the individual, it demonstrates the ongoing pressure newcomers face to navigate relationships that may involve racial or religious prejudice, discrimination, or stereotyping.

Participants also noted that some teachers were not sensitive enough or accommodating to new students’ adjustment and cultural needs. For instance, Laila (Egypt, grade 12) recounted:

[Local students] always used to make fun of me, you know. I think I was one of the few, like, coloured people in the school, and they always just, yeah. I try to forget it, but I can tell you. At lunchtime, I hated going out in the snow, and I remember even the teachers. They used to make me go out because it was my first time experience in snow, and it was

so cold. I used to hide under the desks to avoid going outside, and the teachers wouldn't treat me that well either. Like, they'd just, you know, think I was some idiot because I didn't understand, like, their culture. Rather than them trying to, you know, trying to adopt me into their culture, they were like trying to create barriers around me to avoid certain situations that might happen between me and the students.

In contrast to this negative experience, Laila also shared a positive experience with a different teacher:

My English teacher. Her name is Miss [name of the teacher] and she's at [name of the school] right now. She always used to help me escape with writing. I'm not a very big writer still to this day, but writing poems or just short journals really helped me, and she'd read them and she'd like analyze them and make sure I was doing okay. The strength came from her, like, helping me get involved which helped me learn a lot about myself as a person.

Laila's positive encounter with her teacher made it abundantly clear how influential teachers can be in the educational experiences of newcomers. By helping her through the process of strengthening her writing skills, Laila's teacher supported her in acquiring self-confidence and a greater understanding of her interests and values.

**Friendship Group Dynamics: Cliques Among Local Students.** Being part of a clique has the potential to provide students with positive experiences that might even improve their academic achievement (Witvliet et al., 2010). However, this form of friendship dynamic common to Canadian schools is often unfamiliar to newcomers. In the context of Canadian schools, cliques may exhibit relational aggressive activities and toxic patterns of behaviour involving bullying and discrimination based on group membership and homogeneity (Lodder et

al., 2016). Having to navigate among various social groups at school, especially when the concept of cliques is new to many newcomer adolescents, adds to these students' existing challenges. Participants spoke about the social phenomenon of cliques and their observations about the impact of this phenomenon on intercultural friendship formation. Laila (Egypt, grade 12) said she had lived in many countries, yet she had never seen cliques. It was hard for her to make friends as the cliques seemed to be exclusive, and she felt like an outsider:

You know I ... learned about cliques for the first time. I always saw them ... on TV and they'd be like popular kids or like geeks or whatever. I've lived in many countries, like Tunisia and Nigeria, Algeria. I've been on many vacations to Paris and Tunisia. Like, I've been in a lot of places and I've never ... like experienced the cliques before, but I guess it was like very exclusive. Like tried to exclude everybody from, you know, if they were a little bit different or whatever.

This reflects the importance of power dynamics in relationships. Newcomer students gravitate to other newcomers because they perceive each other to be equal in terms of social power and hence can trust one another more than local students. April (Mexico, grade 12) highlighted the social pressure and fear of judgment caused by associating with one particular social group:

Yeah. So, like, if say this person is talking to me, but they don't want to be seen talking to another person by their group. This is what I think about, right? Because I just feel like a lot of people here, like, they're worried about how they will be perceived by others. So, like, maybe they don't want to talk to that person outside of the classroom. Like, for example, me, talk to that person because they'll be viewed differently, or it's, like, why is she talking to that person if we're her friends?

Furthermore, Nicole (Vietnam, grade 11) said that when there was an effort made to include her in a pre-existing clique, it was an Asian-Canadian girl who took the initiative rather than one of the Caucasian girls who were already a part of the group. Nicole reasoned that the Asian-Canadian girl probably imagined they had a similar ethnic background:

Um, I think that I have more friends that are international students than Canadian students. I have some of them but not many. 'Cause, like, they have their own group 'cause when, even, even like in my class, the one that come and talk to me first are the Asian girls.

**Cultural Differences in Self-Expression and Social Norms.** Newcomer students spoke of the roles that cultural and social factors, such as differences in thoughts and emotional expression, played in their overall academic performance. More specifically, differences between their thoughts and emotional expression and those of the local students hindered or enhanced their communication with local students. This included different communication types such as verbal, nonverbal, and physical touch.

***Differences in Thoughts, Beliefs, and Self-Expression.*** The participants analyzed the manner in which people from their home countries expressed themselves emotionally in comparison to those in Canada. In addition, they discussed the importance of maintaining an open mind and being forthright when expressing one's ideas, beliefs, or preferences. Here is April's (Mexico, grade 12) breakdown of how students who come from a variety of cultural backgrounds express themselves:

Some cultures are more like straightforward than others and maybe you're not ready for that. It just fits that they're different because I think that's the major one you know. Like because some cultures—for example, the Germans. They can be like—if they don't like

something, they're, like, oh, I hate that. And you're like—what? Like that's something weird for some people because they're not used to someone telling them right away what they think you know. It's like some people are used to, like, oh, I really like this place to go to eat, but then the person is like yeah, I like it, too. But they don't really say what they want or like like. But then there's other people that are, like, I hate that place, like, I don't want to go there. So, then you're, like, taken aback from that and maybe you're, like, okay, this person is kind of weird. Yeah, because some people will be, like, more open or more closed and won't really tell you what they feel. So, I guess it's just something that you have to be prepared.

In this brief yet deep analysis, April made a connection between way of self-expression and conformity. When describing people who are open, she said:

You right away say what you feel, like, you won't hold back and you won't conform. And if you're closed, you'll conform with every single thing. Even if you don't like it, you'll go with it because you're afraid of opening or saying too much.

April's observation is consistent with what has been written about how conformity influences the process of acculturation (Roccas et al., 2000). For example, those with introverted personality traits are more likely to conform to mainstream culture because they tend to remain silent and rarely express their needs.

Beliefs regarding the public expression of emotions was another area where newcomers distinguished themselves from local students. Nicole used the term “open-minded” to describe local students' attitudes toward public expression, implying that she perceived the opposite (i.e., her home country's attitude) as close-minded:

In our culture, our parents are really strict and all that we can focus on is studying. But here, there are more, like, open-minded and, like, you can easily see people hugging or kissing each other in the hall. But that's nothing like that in my country [...] In my country, even holding hands is a big problem. But here, like, um, when you do something like a social dance, you have to touch other people and something like that. But it's kind of weird to me because I have never did, I have never done that before. The friends here they have different beliefs, and they have, like, different opinions about that. They think it's normal, nothing to worry about that.

Similar to other quotes, this demonstrated the internalized inferiority newcomers experience toward their own cultural and social norms in comparison to their perceptions of Canadian culture.

**Homophily.** The newcomer students tended to form connections with others of the same cultural background since they shared comparable experiences, stories, and cultural beliefs. Newcomer students were able to better understand one another and connect on a deeper level since they came from comparable cultural backgrounds and had similar difficulties in adjusting to their new environments. Amelle (China, grade 11) discussed her observations on the distinctions between intercultural and same-cultural friendship development, as well as the reasons why she believes that friendships between people of the same culture are simpler to develop:

I think it's because of the cultural difference. Like, some of my friends are from the Philippines and also Korea. So we were both from Asia, and that's, like, the same background culture. And for Asian people, their friendships are more intense than Canadian students. For the local students, they need the space between each other. But

for Asian friends, we could be, like, stick together all the time, and I can text them all the time, and no matter what I'm going through, I can talk to them. But for Canadian friends, they will be, like, oh, it's your personal stuff, and it has nothing to do with me. So you have to deal with that alone, and I don't want to be getting involved with your personal issues.

Amelle's response drew attention to a further cultural distinction, namely the importance that local students placed on respecting personal space, which was noted by a number of participants as being strongly emphasized. This cultural difference in understanding and respecting personal space between local and newcomer students exemplifies not only the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures, but also the potential for conflict resulting from these differences. Newcomers from a collectivistic culture may interpret individualistic cultural preferences for maintaining personal space and boundaries as social rejection.

On a related note, Hanwen shed light on a very important point by revealing that despite the fact that she might not have spoken the same language as other newcomer students, she was still able to connect with them. This demonstrates that cultural understanding and acceptance is essential for the development of friendships:

I don't think language is the main thing, because I don't speak the same language as Korean people, but I can still, like, be pretty close to them because we have the same cultural background, like Asian cultural background.

This quote highlighted a fundamental aspect of this study: relationship building, especially when it comes to intercultural friendship, is not limited to language proficiency. In fact, understanding cultural backgrounds and having respect for each other's differences is just as important as being fluent in English for establishing meaningful friendships.

**Propinquity.** Students who were new to the country and enrolled in ESL programs had a greater chance of forming relationships with other newcomer students who shared similar physical spaces and activity schedules. This was a result of the increased opportunities for them to engage in social activities together. Nicole (Vietnam, grade 11) disclosed that:

Because she come from the same culture with me, so she may better understand me than the other friends. And because we share the same locker and we talk a lot. We have our e-mail and Facebook, so we can manage, and sorry, we can plan to go out quite regularly. We have more things to do together.

Nicole emphasized two social phenomena that were covered in earlier chapters, homophily and propinquity. She stated that the social connection she had with her friends improved because they shared similar cultural values. Close physical proximity also made it simpler for them to connect frequently and organize activities together, which resulted in strengthening their social ties with other newcomer friends.

**Culture Shock.** A few of the newcomers discussed their experiences with culture shock, which may be defined as difficulties encountered during the phase of transitioning to a new setting (Jabeen et al., 2019). Common obstacles such as culture shock, language hurdles and a lack of social capital help newcomer students establish a common ground with each other to discuss these issues and connect with one another. Laila (Egypt, grade 12) gave an account of what she referred to as "cultural shock":

I didn't really understand—like it was such a culture shock because I've mostly lived on the eastern side of the world and this was my first time in the western. So something that I've never come across was sarcasm, and it took me such a long time to understand it and people were so sarcastic, and I just thought I was, like, stupid or something, you know,

coming in. Like, what are they saying or are they joking? But now I'm one of the most sarcastic people.

In this excerpt, Laila described the trajectory of her experience with immigration and the adjustment phase after she settled in and got to know the social norms of her Canadian community. Laila's experiences highlighted an interesting point: the extent of language's impact on social connections. It is not enough to master the host country's language to connect with local students; it is also essential to be familiar with figures of speech, jokes, metaphors, and social idioms. This quote emphasized the overlap between language and culture, and clearly showed how these elements are essential in establishing intercultural friendships.

Hanwen (China, grade 12) also described her experience of what she considered culture shock:

Socially comfortable? I guess to a certain extent it's kind of not—I was kind of not used to it, because they have a different lifestyle, different ways of socializing with others. For example, like, in Chinese culture, we are more conservative I would say, and here, people are kind of more—they feel more comfortable about expressing their opinions. Yeah. So yeah, that's kind of part of the culture shock.

Hanwen came to a different conclusion about what her experience meant than Laila. Her culture shock had more to do with what local students were willing to speak about, such as their views, thoughts, ideas, and beliefs, and less to do with her inability to comprehend the nuanced ways in which these things might be articulated.

***Differences in Communication Styles.*** Newcomers mentioned there was a noticeable difference in communication styles between themselves and local students. Newcomer students tended to be less direct when expressing themselves or sharing their opinions, and indicated this

often represented respect in their cultures. Considering that communication is a vital component of relationships, this difference largely impacted the way each group perceived the other. For example, Hanwen (China, grade 12) shared:

I don't think they [her Chinese friends] will like to comment on those things so often. Like, for example, when see somebody's lunch is not so good, in China, I wouldn't comment on it because I feel like in considering like the Chinese cultural way, it's not appropriate and it's not respecting the other person.

Hanwen brought up another essential aspect of the disparities that exist across cultures, notably in communication. According to her, the interpersonal characteristics of self-expression and openness have the potential to be misunderstood as disrespect due to variations in culture.

***Differences in Perception of Maturity.*** Participants often shared responses about maturity in Canada. Newcomer students perceived local students to be more mature than youth in their home countries. For instance, Laila (Egypt, grade 12) noted: "I feel like here, in Canada, people mature faster than from when I was, like, in other countries." She added: "Like they mature much more faster, so maybe I didn't understand sarcasm because I haven't been on their mental matureness level." This was an interesting observation, as Laila had lived in several other countries before Canada and therefore, she had had rich cultural experiences. In its entirety, her interview reflected a deep knowledge of cultural differences.

Some newcomer students noted rapidly growing maturity in themselves. Hue (Vietnam, grade 11) attributed her own increased maturity to the fact that she had to take care of herself and be more responsible here in Canada in comparison to her home country, where her mother used to help her: "Yeah, like, I'm talkative, and I'm more talkative and happier, and, like, I feel, ah,

because I, I'm here without my mom and I have to do everything by myself, so I feel a little older.”

### ***Structural Factors***

This category encompasses the larger educational, administrative, and institutional settings that either boost or diminish the chance of incoming students and local students forming intercultural connections. One of the most important themes that emerged from the investigation was that there were few opportunities for social contact between the two groups. This was mostly attributable to the fact that newcomer students were segregated into English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms.

**Limited Opportunities for Social Interaction: ESL Classes.** As per the concept of propinquity discussed earlier, there is a higher chance of forming a social connection with those you have frequent interactions with. Unfortunately, segregation from local students diminishes opportunities for newcomer students to have intercultural communication. For participants, ESL classes tended to prevent intercultural friendship formation and encourage same-cultural friendships. For example, when asked about possible ways to meet local students and connect with them, April (Mexico, grade 12) said:

Well, like, I wouldn't know what to tell you in the sense that if international students are in an ESL class. It's already hard to meet Canadian students because you're not even having, like, a class with Canadian students. So, like, that makes it hard, right? Because you don't even share a class with them, so how are you supposed to, like, approach them? I think it's, like, important that maybe there should be like a class that newcomers need to have with other Canadian students.

She added:

Because I don't know how they expect us to make friends if we don't even, like, co-exist with them in the first place. It's not like someone is in the hallway, and I'm just going to approach them and [say] okay, what's up? That's kind of weird and [an] awkward way of approaching someone. So I guess just, like, they need to incorporate them more and not separate them so much because I feel like maybe in the school they're, like, a little bit separated. Because it's, like, okay, you're a newcomer, and you have all these ESL classes, and you have no classes with any Canadian students.

Unlike other newcomer students, Nicole (Vietnam, grade 11) was not enrolled in an ESL class.

Because of this, she had opportunities to form social connections with local students:

Yeah, I think so, and like more international they should, they should provide more interaction with ESL student with the normal one. I'm a different one, I'm not in ESL class, so I have two Canadian friends. But mostly the one in the ESL class, they only have friends with international student.

These two quotes clearly show the role ESL classes played in facilitating or hindering social connections with local students. In April's experience, ESL classes prevented social interaction opportunities as it was challenging to meet with locals while in ESL classes all day. In Nicole's case, meeting and connecting with local students was easier because she did not attend ESL classes. Not having to attend ESL classes indicated Nicole's English language proficiency, another factor that could have promoted friendship formation with her two local friends.

### *Newcomers' Strategies*

Participants articulated a wide range of psychological and personality factors, levels of fluency, and cross-cultural backgrounds that impacted their experiences as newcomers and interactions with locals. However, participants also engaged in a number of creative strategies to

initiate social connections with local students and form intercultural relationships. Moreover, newcomer students shared their ideas about suggested or already applied strategies by local students, teachers, and schools. In the following sections, I present examples of strategies that participants used as well as a few interesting outliers, which are grouped thematically as expectations for newcomer students, local students, teachers, and school administration.

**Strategies Learned: Initiate Connections, Use Perspective-Taking, and Share Interests.** To become friends with local students, newcomers can initiate conversations with local students, engage in social activities (e.g., volunteering, sports), and use self-disclosure to invite connections. For example, in the following excerpt, April (Mexico, grade 12) shared a strategy she took to initiate social connections with local students by asking general questions that would lead to short conversations, allowing for the exchange of personal information:

Yeah, you need to keep asking questions. Like everything. So you start like, “How are you?” and stuff, but then you go like “Oh, so what are your hobbies?” or, if they say, “I like to read,” [you say] “Oh, what type of books do you like to read? Why do you like to read those books?” Just keep asking questions because then you know a lot about the person.

Using the classroom environment and activities in the classroom was another primary method that participants used in order to increase connectedness with local students. Frequently, this consisted of approaching local students and asking them for assistance in understanding their assigned coursework, as was the case with Hue (Vietnam, grade 11):

We had the same math class and we sit, she sit behind me, and like, and I couldn’t understand teacher said, and I ask her and we talk about school.

Participants often utilized homework as a means to start conversations with local students. On the other hand, some newcomer students adopted a technique in which they traded their expertise in one topic (typically mathematics or science) for assistance in English. Or, in order to make a connection, some students assisted their classmates with the topics in which they excelled. For instance, Nicole (Vietnam, grade 11) used her proficiency in mathematics to establish relationships with other students in the classroom:

Um, yeah some of them are Canadian. Um, 'cause I did quite a good job in my math and chemistry, so some of the friends in my class start to look for me to ask for questions.

Then we get to know each other. That's how I make friends.

In addition, individuals like Nicole employed methods to form friendships, such as joining a team, bonding over a sport or other common interest, or getting to know one another via similar interests. Nicole said the following about her time spent participating in a photographic club:

Um, like, there is some Canadian student that I have never met before and, like, I have no, I have no idea about them. But they appear to be really nice and, like, friendly to me and then, ah, we start to share our [inaudible word] and our photos together, and we try to discuss about it. And, like, we form our friendship.

The primary advantage of using strategies such as sports, mathematics, and science was that these activities did not demand as high of a level of English fluency as other activities, such as clubs, volunteering, or other social activities where there is a requirement for verbal communication. Other techniques that participants utilized were internal, like relying on their own resilience, focusing on modifying negative self-talk to be more confident, and avoiding self-blame in relation to their accent or lack of English proficiency. They fostered self-compassion

and normalized the fear of making mistakes when speaking English. This was conveyed by Tsomo (India, grade 10):

I think it's because people are shy. I think newcomers should be more open and should not be scared just because people gonna judge you, because we're just learning, right, we're students. So, learning is the one that matters, not like the people who are judging you. No one knows what you are gonna be when you grow up. So, it might be like you were different in high school and you got different when you've grown up, so I don't think people should be scared that other people might judge you. Because all the people have eyes, they will judge you, and they don't say anything. So, we don't have to depend on them or just, you know, get scared.

During her interview, Zeinab (Turkey, grade 12) shared her technique for providing positive reinforcement in the face of linguistic errors:

Yeah, [newcomer students], I think they should be like more comfortable with their language, with their English, and they shouldn't really care about their accent 'cause I know, like, this is, the one of the most important, like, problems to them. Their English, their language, their accent, they really care about it because what people do. Um, so I think they should be more comfortable, and if they wanna ask a question to a stranger, they should go and ask. Like, they shouldn't be like, "Oh, what is that person going to think about my accent?" or "What if I say this wrong, what if I say this, ah, word wrong?" like, um, I think they should be just confident.

Tsomo (India, grade 10) reiterated the instances that demonstrate how newcomer students are persistent in speaking out despite the fear of making language errors. She said that the support

she received from her father and the relaxed atmosphere of her ESL class allowed her to feel more at ease when it came to making mistakes:

I think it's my dad. He always, like, encourages me, like saying, "It's ok, you're a newcomer, you're better than other." Just saying the good words, it actually makes me kind of confident. [...] I was my dad was saying, "You should raise your hand and answer the questions." 'Cause in junior high, I was, like, kind of scared, like even if I know the answers, like I don't wanna answer, I don't want my answer to share with anyone. [...] But here in ESL class, it was like all of them were just like you or better than you, but not that much. Yeah, it's kind of like all of them are same level, so it actually makes you comfortable. So that's the reason that I actually got more open or something.

Some of the newcomers, like Nicole (Vietnam, grade 11) and Keiko (Japan, grade 11), made use of more overt methods of starting social interactions, such as reading up on ways to make friends, before they felt more at ease approaching the local students and starting up conversations with them. For instance, Keiko (Japan, grade 11) devised a plan to combat her feelings of isolation by doing research on the best ways to meet new people:

When I arrive here [...] I was alone, and I had lunch all by myself alone in the like [inaudible word] my locker. I was so loneliness. I feel so loneliness. But one day, I realized if I didn't like challenge, like, just sitting in the, in front of my locker and having lunch by myself, nothing happen. Never happen. So, I searched how to make friends in board. Like I, I read all, all of the, like, news. Then, I tried everything that news said. Then, yeah, I then make friends. So one [inaudible] um, if like so, for example, in the

class just say like, so let's say I dropped the pen. Of course, maybe somebody take it and say thank you, like then start the conversation.

Keiko (Japan, grade 11) also used research to formulate a plan for establishing connections with other people. She also emphasized the significance of being the one to take the initiative and assume responsibility for making contact with local students. Laila's (Egypt, grade 12) opinions on being proactive were similar, and she urged individuals to immerse themselves into new environments without worrying about being rejected:

I feel like they should always, you know, get involved with the school. Maybe they'll find the friend in the most odd place. And you know, for me, getting involved was a big thing. Like I've always been in clubs or doing after school activities and speaking with teachers and trying to get little projects done. Getting involved in the most thing and, like, being very confident with yourself, you know, and trying not to be shy. Being shy in the first two weeks, sure; but, try and build up your confidence to go speak to somebody you heard about as being like-minded as you are. You know, just make sure you know that you're going to be okay, but just to work towards being okay. Like, don't just stay put and say that people are not accepting you. You have to place yourself in that environment, too, so people can start to accept you.

Participants also discussed the ability to use techniques such as perspective-taking to understand the motivation behind other people's behaviours and actions before judging them. In the following example, Lily (China, grade 10) shared an example about how a prejudicial act such as discrimination could be interpreted differently by keeping good intentions in mind:

Well the teachers ... I have heard some like, some students complain about the, they feel they are being discriminated but, ah, it, um, it doesn't seem very like discrimination?

Maybe the person they are trying to talk with or trying to work with doesn't have the, like, doesn't have the, maybe they have they been stressed out and they, they don't want, like, they are not showing their best.

### **Suggestions for Local Students: Initiate Social Connections and Use Discussions**

**About Cultures.** In addition to encouraging other newcomer students to initiate social interactions, participants presented a number of strategies and suggestions for local students that they think might enhance social connectivity. Newcomers shared that these strategies would be especially important for those who are shy and have less confidence in their social skills. For example, Hue (Vietnam, grade 11) explained that it would be preferable if a local student took the lead in initiating social conversation with her because it would boost her confidence and because she thinks that local students are more socially competent. Taking such initiative would encourage newcomers to reciprocate:

Um, ah, that people can like, like [inaudible] and, like, be shy, and so if people are talking with us first it's, it's make us more confident because they, they are social. And we can start to talk because we still so shy to talk so if, if they talk first, we can.

Another approach that was proposed by newcomers was for local students to act as discussion moderators to facilitate and enrich their knowledge about other cultures and social norms. Moreover, local students may aid newcomer students with understanding Canadian culture and values by sharing their own knowledge of these with newcomer students. This would not only increase newcomer students' information, but also help them create social relationships with local students. In general, this would be beneficial to the process of social integration. Hue (Vietnam, grade 11) disclosed:

I'm, our culture, like, ah, I can maybe some, sometime, ah, something that not in their culture so we can talk about the, our cultural to them like something different. And that's make me know more thing about, ah, different country.

**Suggestions for Teachers: Facilitate Introductions and Social Gathering.** Participants said that if their teachers had introduced them to the class and specifically to local students, it could have been simpler for them to become friends with youths from the host country. One way to accomplish this would be to encourage newcomer and local students to collaborate on group projects together. April (Mexico, grade 12) suggested:

Also, maybe teachers can like—if you're a newcomer, they should know you're a newcomer and have like, oh well, there's going to be a group project, but have Canadian students work with the newcomers and not maybe like, "Make your groups." Because if they say "make your groups," they're going to go to their usual people. So, it's kind of like the teacher has to be like you guys are going to work with this person and kind of like that's the way they can incorporate more and have them actually talk and stuff.

The recommendation made by April draws attention to the significance of integrating teachers in the process of creating social connections between newcomer and local students. She has placed a strong emphasis on the idea of homophily, which states that members of a given group are more likely to connect with members of the same group if they are not prompted to make alternative selections. This is one of the areas in which teachers can assist in mediating social interactions.

Unfortunately, instructors may also operate as hurdles to the integration process of newcomer students in their classrooms. Laila (Egypt, grade 12) said:

Especially with my teachers. Like when I say something and you don't know how to follow up. Like with my teachers, I feel like they need to be more educated about the subject of international students, just because I felt like I was such an outcast. So I would say something and maybe they'd [other students], like, laugh at me, and the teacher would just be like, you know, next question.

The encounter that Laila had with her teacher demonstrated that educators may play a more active role in advocacy by bringing attention to the cultural disparities that exist between native-born students and students from other countries. Also, teachers could play an active role in social and school integration by creating opportunities for students from different groups to interact with one another more socially. Examples of such opportunities include joint learning projects, club activities, sports, and other extracurricular activities.

**Suggestions for School Administration: Create Social Interaction Opportunities and Provide Cultural Education.** By providing chances for students from different cultural backgrounds to interact with one another, schools have the potential to promote intercultural friendships. Establishing mentoring and leadership programs, as well as social and scientific groups, are all examples of what this might entail. For instance, Aisha (Syria, grade 12) had a favorable experience with the leadership programs that she participated in:

They have also a program which is, like, um, the leadership. Yeah, it's like you have to talk with, to help newcomers, that's a new program, I think, because I didn't get it last year. So this year I was full, so I didn't have space to do that. And, like, you have to like helping newcomers and show them the school and talk to them, help them find friends, so they tried.

Aisha also said: “So, like the school tries, like teachers are trying like, usually we have teachers the same, like, we have like group work and the partners, they deciding, not the students, and, like, that’s helpful too.”

In these two quotes, Aisha highlighted the initiatives that her school and teachers have already taken to help newcomer students feel more welcome in their school environment. She praised the school's efforts to expand social opportunities for newcomer and local students through the development of leadership programs. Furthermore, Aisha asserted that when teachers actively assign students to group projects rather than relying on the students’ own preferences, the social interactions of the students improve.

Schools should also provide local students with accurate education about newcomer students’ concerns, needs, and cultures. In addition to involving newcomer students in this education by inviting them to share their lived experiences with local students, Laila (Egypt, grade 12) recommended: “Don’t listen to the media. But definitely, like, speak to people who have come from other countries.” She continued discussing her take on the role media is playing in depicting newcomers’ image:

The media has really changed the way people look at Arabs in general. And I’m not like—I’m an Egyptian Muslim, and the media right now is like slandering our image. It has definitely, like, curtailed me from having a lot of, you know, opportunities, but there are other ones that always open up to people who are being hurt by the media. I don’t know, it just happens that way.

Laila shed light on the advocacy role that schools must play in correcting misperceptions and stereotyping that newcomer students may encounter as a result of inaccurate media coverage of marginalized groups.

In summary, there were four overarching categories of findings: interpersonal, interpersonal, structural factors, and newcomers' suggestions and strategies for enhancing their sense of belonging in their school environment. The first three categories contain the majority of factors that impede students' social interactions. Despite the difficulties presented in the preceding categories, newcomers in the fourth category demonstrated a strong desire to interact with local students. They suggested initiatives and strategies to establish social connections with local students, ways for teachers to foster these connections, and options for school administration to advocate for inclusive policies and oversee the social integration process. This demonstrates that they believe they have a responsibility to make friends with local students, despite the fact that it can be difficult and that they are sometimes rejected.

On the basis of the main observations and themes that emerged from these findings, I can conclude that newcomers perceive themselves as having greater responsibility for making friends and integrating into schools. This highlights the importance of the primary objective of this study, which was to challenge how newcomer students perceive the concept of social integration based on their social interactions' experiences with local students in Canadian high schools. Participants shared very rich experiences which have the potential to inform counselling, research, and education practices. These experiences can also potentially inform governmental and provisional agencies and organizations involved in the social integration of newcomer youths into Canadian high schools. In the next chapter, I discuss the implications of the newcomer participants' shared lived experiences.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter, I discuss the role that language plays in facilitating social connections with local students and whether language limitation is the sole factor hindering the social integration process. Then, I reflect on the conceptualization of social integration in the Canadian context, pointing out the lack of clear distinction between integration and assimilation. I consider community-based programs and their roles in promoting social integration of newcomers. Next, I share thoughts about same-ethnic friendships and their benefits for newcomer students, especially when they first arrive in the host country. I emphasize the role teachers can play in creating new opportunities for social interaction between newcomers and local students, and discuss how findings from this study can inform counselling practices and interventions in school to improve the mental health and well-being of newcomers. Finally, I present the limitations of this research and propose areas for future study.

As highlighted in the findings on intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural factors, newcomers' experiences with intercultural friendship formation were significant for their social development and sense of belonging. Listening to and reading participants' lived experiences was a great personal learning experience that I also found very empowering. In addition to personal gains and validation, as I relate to most of what was shared by newcomer students, this study helped me realize the responsibility we hold as psychologists and academic researchers in taking an active role to voice the concerns and social issues faced by marginalized populations such as newcomer youths in Canadian high schools. By paying close attention to the needs and struggles of these young people in the area of social interaction, we will be able to address their needs, share knowledge about this age group, and facilitate positive change that respects newcomer students' cultural and social values. I aimed to shed light on the issues around the use

of the term social integration, more specifically to challenge it and to explore the role of government and community-based programs in perpetuating the use of this term despite its lack of specificity.

This study enhances our understanding of how newcomer students perceive the meaning of their experiences when socially interacting with local students. The findings highlighted the complexity of intercultural social interactions and provided insight on how to better accommodate newcomer students' psychological and social needs (Oikonomidou, 2018). The 19 newcomer students who were part of this study represented diverse ethnic, social, and cultural backgrounds. This diversity added an in-depth layer to our understanding of the role that cultural differences play in friendship formation, and the students' knowledge provided empirical evidence to demonstrate the multilevel factors that support or hinder the quantity and quality of social interactions between newcomer and local students in Canadian high schools.

### **The Persistent Challenge of Language Inadequacy**

Newcomers' experiences of social interaction with local peers highlighted important intrapersonal factors such as language insufficiency and personality shifts, both of which played a significant role in how intercultural friendship was experienced by newcomer students. All participants identified language as a major barrier in establishing connections with local students. These findings support previous research about the role of language in social interaction. It is well established in the literature that language has a significant role in positive social interactions as well as in the inclusion of newcomers within intercultural friendships (Beißert et al., 2019; Esser, 2006; Gareis, 2012).

Language has a strong influence on everyday communication, especially regarding the education and academic success of newcomer students. However, language can also cause

inequalities, as language barriers increase social gaps and reduce access to education and societal recognition (Esser, 2006). It is not surprising that newcomers showed a great interest in acquisition of the host country's language upon arrival to their host counties, because it would be a useful tool for communication. Unfortunately, research shows that language proficiency can take up to seven years (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). During such an extended period, newcomers lack the ability to establish meaningful connections with native-born English-speaking peers. Even though language insufficiency is an extremely complicated problem within a multilevel governance system, participants' responses attributed language insufficiency to themselves. This internal attribution associated with language difficulties is connected to the notion that newcomers are responsible for overcoming social exclusion (Cederberg, 2014).

Participants attributed local students' lack of interest in becoming friends to the notion of local students being "bored" of newcomers' limited language skills during social conversations. Although newcomer students used the word bored to describe locals' responses, considering the context of friendships and most importantly the breadth of newcomers' language and limited vocabulary, the word "apathetic" might be more accurate to describe local students' perceived reaction towards newcomers. An apathetic response to newcomers' social initiatives can be both degrading and demoralizing. Newcomer students not only took responsibility for their lack of language proficiency, but also for other peoples' behaviours and reactions.

Despite internalizing responsibility for their lack of language proficiency, some newcomers exhibited a constructive outlook and emphasized the importance of working hard to learn the language so that they could enhance their academic performance as well as their ability to connect socially with their peers. For example, Zeinab said: "As an ESL student, I know that I

still should always study and more and more and after studying, um, I shouldn't my, like, blame myself for anything. Because I am doing what I should do." Students such as Zeinab expressed resilience and positivity in coping with negative comments that undermined their linguistic abilities. Moreover, Zeinab's response showed a growth mindset in taking up the challenge of overcoming language difficulties. Similarly, Aya referenced people's responses to her use of English: "Just when you go and talk to some people, and you speak English and is still bad English [inaudible word] 'Oh my God, are you crazy, what do you want?'" In this passage, Aya indicated that the negative remarks she received about her "bad English" did not prevent her from initiating conversations with others.

The two examples demonstrated that when participants had a positive attitude toward language acquisition, it assisted them in externalizing their language limitations. When newcomer students recognized that language inadequacy was a stage of transition that would improve with persistence, they demonstrated a high level of resilience. This general theme of language insufficiency is directly related to another theme I identified: personality shifts and their effect on the formation of friendships. This theme demonstrated a connection between language proficiency and personality changes. As a result of the adjustment and relocation process, newcomer students may experience personality changes such as becoming more introverted or "closed off," but more notably, these personality changes may occur due to language deficiency and inability to communicate fluently with others, causing them to become more isolated.

In addition, it was also found that a person's language skills affected whether they were allowed to join or leave a group of friends. In their study, Beißert et al. (2019) investigated the role of language skills in the inclusion and exclusion decisions of refugee youth in Germany in

hypothetical intergroup scenarios. They found that German adolescents were considerably less likely to socially include Syrian refugees with poor German language skills compared to other German natives or Syrian refugees who spoke German fluently. These findings indicate that regardless of adolescents' cultural identities, the decision to include or exclude them was primarily based on their language skills. The researchers concluded that language has a critical role in intergroup processes and peer inclusion: "it was the language that mattered for inclusion decisions" (Beißert et al., 2019, p. 230).

In contrast to Beißert et al.'s (2019) suggestion that newcomers' struggles in making friends with local students are purely due to miscommunication and language insufficiency, my study found many other factors contribute equally to the challenges in making friends with local students. Many studies have discussed the challenges newcomer youth and immigrants in general face in linguistic transition, including those who know a sufficient amount of the English language before arriving to an English-speaking host country (Kassan et al., 2019). For students with limited English language skills, it can take up to seven years to gain language proficiency with the assistance of ESL classes (Kassan et al., 2019; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). If language proficiency is a condition to establish social connections with local students, newcomers may experience prolonged difficulties that extend into their lives beyond their school years. Therefore, this study suggests that while working on linguistic acquisition for academic achievement, other interpersonal and structural factors related to newcomers' lives such as class separation, teachers' cultural awareness, and settlement and integrational programs, should also be considered.

### **The Impact of Structural Factors on Intercultural Peer Interaction**

There is an abundance of research focusing on integration difficulties due to English language skills (Beißert et al., 2019; Drake, 2014; Esser, 2006; Evans et al., 2020). However, this study found that social interaction issues were not only due to language skills per se; newcomer students were more likely to form friendships with other newcomer students, even though they lacked English language skills when talking with these fellow newcomers. This suggests that barriers other than English language skills prevent intercultural friendships. For example, the study found that newcomers perceived local students as being intolerant of their limited English, which also reflects the important role of power dynamics in friendship formation. Newcomer students often perceive equal social power with each other due to similarities in their social capital, a shared need to make friends, and comparable English language skills.

Language difficulties can also be an indirect barrier to friendship formation at a structural level. This limitation can come from school systems and the requirement for most newcomer students to attend ESL classes. Newcomer students are expected to spend much of their school time in ESL classes because these classes are believed to offer more customized and personalized learning that better matches newcomers' needs than regular classes. This was supported in my data, in which most of the newcomer students were assigned to ESL classes by their schools. Yet with the knowledge that other mitigating social barriers discussed above exist for these newcomer students, it is important to acknowledge that this sensitive learning environment further distances newcomer students from socially connecting to their local counterparts. It is evident that both homophily and propinquity present significant barriers in friendship formation between newcomer and local students. For example, in this study, students shared that the time spent together in ESL classes aided in friendship formation with same-culture peers. Since the amount of time one is exposed to peers affects friendship formation,

longer times of exposure result in closer relationships. The findings suggest that a blended approach to education for newcomers that encourages more social and cultural interaction between newcomer and local students would be more beneficial than the traditional ESL approach. These concerns could be addressed at policy levels of provincial and federal ESL programs for newcomer youths.

### **What Does “Social Integration” Mean?**

In this study, I examined the concept of social integration from migration, theoretical, and cultural perspectives. I looked at the practical application of social integration from governmental and institutional perspectives. Finally, I reflected on newcomers’ perspectives on social integration, including their hopes and expectations for fellow newcomers, local students, teachers, and school personnel. The findings from this study aligned with previous studies’ findings (de Alcántara, 1995; Evans et al., 2020) regarding how problematic the concept of social integration can be, especially when cultural differences are taken into account.

I noticed discrepancies between the theory of how social integration should be applied in schools and other educational institutions, and actual practice. For example, Berry et al.’s (2006) definition of integration implies equal involvement of the dominant and marginalized groups’ cultures. However, in this study, participants’ experiences communicated their sense of responsibility for having to adapt to the Canadian dominant culture without there being a reciprocal adaptation from local students. School integration programs reinforce a similar idea by focusing solely on newcomers adapting to the culture of the host country. As a result, certain discourses and stereotypes were noticed in participants’ stories about their experiences with intercultural friendships. The narratives observed in this study (e.g., “Maybe they don’t want to listen my story. [Laughs.] And maybe they don’t understand.”) support the idea that newcomers

feel responsible for locals' reactions. Here, newcomers' attitudes about friendship formation align closely with Berry's (2006) description of assimilation, which suggests a minority group has more interest in the dominant group's culture than in its own.

Cederberg (2014) explored the role of integration and migration narratives in the social and political context of the Swedish community. Similar to the findings in the current study, Cederberg (2014) revealed growing social pressure on newcomers to conform to the mainstream cultural values of the host country as a form of assimilationist approach to integration which may result in *cultural othering*: "This is arguably a central feature of contemporary 'integration' approaches across much of Europe, where some have argued that a neo-assimilationist shift has been taking place" (p. 142). According to Cederberg, this debate showed the integration process was much more complex than has been indicated by the type of superficial analysis that blames newcomers for not wanting to integrate. Although there is a lot of work being done on integration to facilitate the inclusion of newcomer students into the Canadian educational system, newcomers continue to experience pressure to conform to Canadian values and culture.

The proposed understanding of the social integration as synonymous or interchangeable with the term *assimilation* is not entirely new in Canadian social and cultural contexts. In Canada, the treatment of Indigenous peoples is a well-known and documented example of assimilation (Friesen & Friesen, 2002). Indigenous peoples were forcibly assimilated despite the fact that this was marketed as integration (Friesen & Friesen, 2002). At the hands of colonizers, Indigenous people faced devastating acts of cultural genocide, interpersonal violence, emotional and physical abuse, and intentional suppression of their cultural identity, religious beliefs, and languages (Parks Canada, 2020). There is also the extensive history of Indigenous peoples' legal, cultural, and environmental assimilation through residential schools (Tsuji, 2022). Despite all

these serious and disastrous experiences of forced assimilation to destroy Indigenous history and cultures, the term *integration* was used to describe the government policy during what was known as the phase of “integrated Indian education” in the late 1960s (Friesen & Friesen, 2002, p. 13). The integration policies aimed to incorporate Indigenous students in provisional day schools with non-Indigenous students.

Friesen and Friesen (2002) commented on the federal government’s plan for Indigenous students’ integration: “the underlying premise on which the new plan was based was clearly assimilation, not integration” (p. 13). Although at the time the federal government claimed that the integration policy would reduce the negative impacts of assimilation that resulted from the poor environment of residential schools, the integrated schools were controlled by non-Indigenous school boards (Barsh, 1994). In fact, even the choice of curriculum and learning materials reflected an assimilation policy rather than an integration one. The learning materials that were used did not reflect Indigenous peoples’ values, cultures, beliefs, or languages and instead, the education reinforced the dominant group’s culture (Perley, 1993).

The policy of integration that aimed to improve students’ education outcomes caused high rates of dropouts among Indigenous students (Barsh, 1994). This failure to engage Indigenous students clearly shows that the integration policy agenda hindered the integration process of the Indigenous people, because the policy was working toward the assimilation agenda of the Canadian government rather than the integration of Indigenous peoples into Canadian culture. This was evident in how the policy overlooked the psychological, developmental, and social requirements of Indigenous students during the formulation, design, and execution of the integration policy (Perley, 1993).

The explanation of why Indigenous peoples were not included in this “integration” policy can be attributed to the concept of a knowledge-power hierarchy in education (Fairclough, 2003). This concept discusses the power relationship created in the field of education between recipients and senders; education involves not only presenting facts, but also teaching a person how to think about a given topic. For example, teaching Indigenous peoples about Canadian culture and language rather than their own taught these students to see themselves in relation to Canada rather than their own culture or languages.

This brief overview regarding the integration policy of Indigenous students in provisional day schools clearly demonstrates the legacy of confusion around the usage of the two terms integration and assimilation. The history of the integration policy used in residential schools shows that the term integration was used to theoretically describe the ambitious process of incorporating Indigenous peoples into non-Indigenous communities in Canada. However, in reality, the policy translated into assimilation practices. This reflection on the conflict in understanding and usage of these two terms elicits the question presented in this study: how should the notion of social integration be re-conceptualized based on newcomer youth’s experiences? This discussion also raises another concern, which is to what extent do current integration policies reflect the meaning of the term as defined by Barsh (1994, p. 37): “if social integration means strengthening a diverse country’s capacity for sustainable development, it must equalize all groups’ enjoyment of freedom and resources, without sacrificing their underlying diversity in the process.”

I must be clear that in this section I am reflecting on the conceptualization of the term social integration, and I am not comparing the experiences of Indigenous peoples with newcomers as there is no foundational grounds for comparison. I am instead using the

experiences of the Indigenous population in Canada to demonstrate the confusion around the use of the two terms, integration and assimilation, within a Canadian context. Based on the treatment of the Indigenous population by the Canadian government, and because the term social integration does not provide a distinctive cultural and social understanding of the inclusion process of newcomer students in Canadian communities, it is necessary to find an alternative term that more accurately reflects the meaning of the inclusion process. I attempted a basic search of the word integration using an online thesaurus, and to my surprise, the word assimilation was at the top of the list of synonyms, which shows the level of confusion around this term. I think this confusion partially arises from the broad range of goals that an integration policy might have, including security, sense of belonging, settlement, friendships, and social support (Lundberg, 2020), in addition to the way that these terms are used in public and political social spaces, which do not necessarily align with their true meanings.

The educational approach to Indigenous peoples and the misuse of the term integration are what most strongly link my example of the treatment of the Indigenous students and the integration policy to my argument for a more integrated approach to newcomer students within the education system, particularly at the high school level. Although I am not comparing the experiences of the Indigenous and the newcomers, the fact that connects these ideas is that the newcomers who enter the Canadian education system experience a process that is closer to assimilation than integration, through the isolation due to ESL classes and by being the only ones educated about cultural difference or required to adapt to the dominant culture.

### **Who Takes Responsibility for Newcomer Social Integration?**

Earlier, I discussed the Canadian government's approach and policies when it comes to social integration. In Alberta and other provinces, there are many integration programs for

immigrant and refugee adults and families (e.g., settlement and integration services offered by the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association [2022]). However, only a few programs are directed to newcomer youth (e.g., children and youth settlement services offered by the Edmonton Immigrant Services Association [2021] and social integration services offered by the John Kennedy Adult Education Centre [2021]). The mandate shared by these integration programs, regardless of their targeted age groups, is that they heavily focus on the settlement needs of newcomers. Moreover, the offered services imply the integration responsibility falls on newcomers, which brings up the previously discussed points about governmental approaches to newcomers' social integration and whether these emphasize integration or assimilation. Government-organized programs also place much of the integration responsibility on newcomers, and then begs the question of whether there has been sufficient effort by the government toward integration. For example, the services these programs are providing to newcomer students cover concepts such as how to develop skills to adapt to Canadian culture (Edmonton Immigrant Services Association, 2021). The discourses used in these programs to emphasize the importance of integration reinforce newcomers' internalized responsibility (as shown by participants in this study) that any failure in achieving this goal should be attributed to their lack of skills (e.g., social or linguistic skills).

### **Within-Ethnic Friendships and Power Dynamics**

This study was centred around an in-depth examination of intercultural friendships, how to promote these friendships, and the dynamics and challenges of these friendships because I believe that intercultural friendship is a vital indicator for the analysis of the social integration of youths and the applicability of this process in Canadian high schools. Although it is important to reflect on the process of intercultural friendship, it is necessary to note the importance of same-

ethnic friendships, as was strongly evident in the responses of participants in this study. All the newcomers shared positive experiences about same-ethnic friendships, particularly where newcomers felt supported by their counterparts.

The positive impacts of same-ethnic friendships have been discussed briefly. However, because this research focused on cross-ethnic relationships, there may be the suggestion that same-ethnic friendships are less favoured. Therefore, I decided to revisit this idea because in the context of my research, same-ethnic friendships are important for newcomers' well-being while cross-ethnic friendships are viewed as important for the facilitation of the social integration process. Each friendship type has a different function to serve; neither should be seen as positive or negative. Graham et al. (2013) discussed the functions of each friendship style and concluded that they have overlapping functions, revealing that both contribute to the overall quality of individuals' experiences within these relationships. Findings from my analysis are consistent with the study by Graham et al. (2013) in that young newcomers often have positive experiences with within-ethnic friendships where they feel included, share common interests and concerns with peers, and do not feel ashamed of making mistakes. On the other hand, experiences with cross-ethnic friendships, despite being less common, offered new opportunities for exchanges of academic, cultural, and social knowledge, as well as participation in clubs or extra-curricular activities. Therefore, both friendship types are important to newcomers and local students because both attend to specific psychosocial needs in these groups (Graham et al., 2013).

### **How Can Teachers Help?**

The roles played by teachers and educators are enormous when it comes to creating a welcoming and safe environment for local students and, more importantly, for newly arrived students. This task is often a challenging one due to the diversity in newcomer students regarding

their age, culture, social status, socioeconomic status, nationality, and immigration experiences prior to arriving in their host country (Lundberg, 2020). Teachers are expected to play a role in facilitating the transition for newcomers because of the extended time students spend at school. This role includes facilitating communication between newcomers and local students, creating social interaction opportunities, and playing an advocacy role to voice newcomers' needs (Lundberg, 2020). These expectations are in addition to the teachers' primary role as educators, delivering curriculum contents, and sharing and organizing instructional materials and activities.

The newcomers' shared experiences, and their hopes and expectations of what they would like their teachers' actions to look like, showed the significant value these students placed on their teachers. Many newcomers shared the perspective that teachers were passive when bullying or discrimination took place in class. Other times, teachers showed less sensitivity toward newcomers' lack of English fluency or tried to push newcomers harder, which led to judgment from other students in class. However, newcomers held high hopes for their teachers' ability to facilitate intercultural friendship, perhaps because newcomers believed their teachers had the authority to take such a role. Teachers can initiate intercultural friendships by introducing each group to the other and can help to create opportunities for social interactions. For example, teachers can assign seating, so a newcomer student sits beside a local student. This simple move would emphasize the principle of propinquity, which states that individuals are more likely to associate with people who are readily available to them. Therefore, teachers could become an important factor in promoting intercultural friendships and social interactions.

Kassan et al. (2019) reported the importance of effective communication and free expression in promoting social interaction. The study showed that newcomer youth receive inadequate orientation from schools upon arrival to their host countries, which leaves them

unprepared for how to navigate school and social norms and practices. This lack of direction within the educational environment adds to already existing stresses caused by lack of social support, homesickness, language insufficiency, and other adjustments challenges. Additionally, research has shown that high school experiences have a large impact on ensuring a successful transition to post-secondary education (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019; Jabeen et al., 2019). The findings of the current study and similar studies reveal the importance of engaging educators, particularly at the high school level, in the facilitation of an intercultural friendship development process that can be incorporated into the learning environment of both newcomer and local students.

### **How Can School Psychologists Help?**

School psychologists are crucial because they advocate for the needs, rights, and well-being of students and assist them in obtaining high-quality academic support so they can achieve their full potential (Rogers et al., 2020). In fact, advocating for change in schools, systems, and policies for the benefit of students and their families is a vital aspect of the work of school psychologists (Rogers et al., 2020), particularly in relation to underrepresented populations. When advocating, successful school psychologists must employ multiple strategies, including relationship development, effective communication, raising public awareness, and gaining knowledge about relevant issues (Rogers et al., 2020). While all these strategies are essential to being a successful advocate, the latter two (i.e., raising public awareness and staying educated on the issues) are particularly important when school psychologists are involved in the social integration of newcomer students. This is because advocacy involves altering an existing circumstance. In this case, the circumstance is the lack of the right way to integrate newcomer students into school. In order to advocate for allocating the necessary resources for newcomer

students as well as addressing their psychosocial needs during the adjustment period, it is crucial to learn everything there is to know about the challenges newcomers face when attempting to integrate and establish social connections with their counterparts, local students.

Another way school psychologists can help is by taking a culturally sensitive approach when assisting students with a diverse background. In order to help design a culturally sensitive intervention that assists with improving intercultural friendships, attitudes, and relationships, school psychologists can identify shortcomings in existing knowledge around newcomer students' social needs to facilitate effective integration (Lokhande & Riechle, 2019). For example, newcomer youths, especially those from refugee backgrounds, usually exhibit resilience and resourcefulness in coping with obstacles (Stewart, 2014). However, some of these youths might also struggle with academic, social, and emotional challenges (Lokhande & Riechle, 2019; Stewart, 2014). The voices and experiences of newcomers can inform not only the scholarly literature in the area of social integration and the importance of intercultural friendships, but more importantly can guide the role of educational psychologists, school teachers, and the overall learning process and outcomes of newcomers. The findings of this study supported the resilience and capacity of newcomer students to endure social challenges by actively developing social connections with local students. The knowledge of the experiences and strengths of newcomers can assist school psychologists who may be interested in a strengths-based counseling approach to develop the social skills of newcomer students and identify how best to support their education, growth, and transition into Canadian society (Stewart, 2014).

One of the important themes highlighted in the findings of this study concerns friendship group dynamics, specifically the power imbalance that showed up in the participant responses associated with the phenomenon of forming friendship groups and cliques. For many newcomer

students, particularly those who shared their input about cliques, the Canadian classroom was their first experience with this phenomenon other than seeing it played out on television.

Promoting a sense of belonging positively affects students' learning and interpersonal relationships (Certo et al., 2003), and being part of a group provides students with positive experiences that might in turn improve their academic achievement (Witvliet et al., 2010).

However, having to deal with cliques at school, a new concept for many newcomer adolescents, might add to their existing adjustment and adaptation challenges. Clique isolation evokes cognitive and emotional responses such as low self-esteem and loneliness (Witvliet et al., 2010).

Adolescents who are socially withdrawn, whether due to peer rejection or poor friendship quality, are more likely to internalize negative experiences. This results in negative adjustment consequences, including depressive symptoms and socio-emotional difficulties (Rubin et al., 2009).

According to research by Inderbitzen et al. (1997) and Levpusek (2012), the association between the development of social anxiety and peer rejection is reciprocal. Social anxiety and isolation result in a lack of social skills, which elicits unfavorable responses from peers. On the other side, having a negative social relationship with a peer group may elicit additional unsettling feelings of self-doubt and self-criticism as well as fear of being criticized, which can ultimately lead to social withdrawal (Levpusek, 2012). The vicious loop between social anxiety and peer group rejection can be utilized to explain the participants' views of friendship group dynamics, which impede social contacts with local students. Knowing the friendship group dynamics and their negative impact from the perspective of newcomer students would enhance the school psychologist's advocacy role, which entails being informed about clique and peer rejection issues and their negative effects on the mental health and well-being of newcomer students.

Understanding the negative impact of group exclusion and power dynamics that might prevent intercultural friendships with local students could inform school psychologists' practices and interventions when helping newcomer students. Interactions between newcomers and local students do not always have to be negative or challenging. When newcomer students have positive and meaningful interactions with local students, their negative perceptions about their own interpersonal skills change, and they feel more confident and trusting in their ability to form relationships. Moreover, creating reciprocated, meaningful relationships would have a positive effect on local students as well. When local students are also encouraged to learn about and from newcomers, this creates an integration process through inclusivity.

### **Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions**

In this section, I present practical implications for the fields of teaching and counseling practice, which can further inform the policies of the government. I also point out a few limitations and provide some suggestions that will be helpful in determining the path that research on this topic should take in the future.

#### ***Implications for Counselling, Education, Research, and Policymakers***

In previous research, newcomers have shared that they felt ESL classes have limited benefits, specifically when it comes to academic goals as these classes do not provide credit toward graduation (Li, 2010). In contrast, the current study found ESL classes had a positive impact on newcomers' well-being because they constituted a safe environment for newcomers to socially interact without fear of being judged due to a lack of English language skills. Moreover, being in ESL classes, as shared by several participants in this study, facilitated same-cultural friendship formation, which reduced homesickness (Hendrickson et al., 2011)

It was evident from participants' responses that students who attended ESL classes shared common characteristics in addition to limited English language skills. It has been found that race and ethnicity are among the salient factors that increase connectivity between individuals (Echols & Graham, 2013). This concept was supported by the findings of the current study through the participants' highlighted preferences for same-ethnicity friends over cross-ethnicity friends. Newcomer students noted similarities with other newcomer students and the availability of other newcomer students in ESL classes. These two indicators seemed to increase the likelihood of developing reciprocal, same-ethnic friendships. Participants did not consider a lack of English language knowledge as a barrier that prevented them from forming social connections with other newcomer students. Instead, participants indicated that they had more things in common such as cultural similarities, shared interests, immigration status, etc., with other newcomer students.

The contradictory reality of newcomer students in the current study was that while ESL classes served as a great place to interact, socialize, and receive learning designed to fit their needs, these classes also prevented them from initiating intercultural relationships with local students. ESL classes help newly arrived students build linguistic proficiency, access academic achievement, and facilitate social connections. However, when social interaction is limited to those who also attend ESL classes, the chances to connect with local students diminish. Unfortunately, before they can transition to traditional (i.e., non-ESL) classrooms with local students, newcomer students need to reach a level of competence in academic English that allows for literacy and academic achievement (Evans et al., 2020; Yates, 2011).

Another important aspect of being in ESL classes, which intersects with language insufficiency, are the interpersonal power dynamics that showed up in participants' responses. The organizational structure of ESL classes increases the risk of social exclusion. For instance, in

some schools, ESL students are assigned a separate lunchroom, as it is assumed this familiar environment would make the students feel more comfortable. However, a power imbalance can be created as a result of separating students to achieve the goal of language attainment. In conclusion, the experiences of newcomers with ESL classes (both positive and negative) showed the importance of these classes in providing students with personalized education but at the same time, highlighted the need to improve structures in a way that would allow for better social inclusivity in a school setting. On a government level, it appears that despite the national effort that has been put into empowering newcomer students through structured ESL programs, there is a lack of data tracking these students after graduating from the ESL programs (Duffy, 2010). This reflects the need for a follow up process to assess the academic and social progress of students who attended ESL classes in order to properly evaluate the effectiveness of these programs and establish continued improvement plans.

As mentioned earlier, although most of the presented research is focused on social integration processes of adult newcomers (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Jabeen et al., 2019; Yates, 2011), I noticed an overlap in the issues experienced by international students in post-secondary settings and the newcomer high school students in the current study. Gebhard (2012) indicated that many challenges faced by international students when socially adapting to university are related to cultural differences in social norms, communication, and interaction styles. For example, he noted American students tended to be more direct in their interactions in general (e.g., questioning, complaining, rejecting invitations), whereas Asian students tend to respond in a more indirect manner, such as turning down an invitation with hesitancy as opposed to direct rejection. A common theme appeared in this study, as newcomer participants made similar

observations about the social and cultural interaction differences between themselves and local students. They also indicated these were factors that hindered friendship formation.

This finding emphasizes the need for early interventions that implement social integration measures to prevent adaptation challenges later when international and newcomer students arrive at university. To resolve such issues, Yan and Sendall (2016) examined the effectiveness of First Year Experience (FYE) programs offered by many colleges and universities in the United States to help first-year undergraduate students adjust to their new environments. The authors shared some recommendations for educational institutions interested in offering FYE courses. These included taking an interdisciplinary approach, which involves stakeholders representing different departments that deal with international students (e.g., office of international students' programs, international students' representatives, and advocates) designing integration programs that address needs (e.g., available social support, level of English proficiency) and include more activities outside the classroom for international students to experience American culture.

Although most of the recommendations suggested by Yan and Sendall (2016) are designed to serve post-secondary international student populations, modified recommendations would benefit newcomer youth student populations as well. For instance, newcomer and local students could share outside classroom activities by attending a local event. Both groups would have an opportunity to interact, and newcomer students would experience Canadian culture. Additionally, an information session about different cultures and traditions could be led by newcomer students, where each introduces their own culture. This activity would not only facilitate interaction between the two groups but would also help newcomer students improve their English language and presentation skills.

In the teaching context, the findings revealed that newcomers tend to associate with fellow newcomers due to shared similarities in cultural values, interests, and experiences. The term homophily encompasses these shared qualities. Building on this idea of associating with others who share similarities, one of the implications that would merit further exploration would be to reflect on how we can use this social phenomenon to better include newcomer students in school culture. Although homophily has been used to explain the function of same-cultural friendship formation, in another way, it could be considered to be one of the barriers hindering intercultural friendship formation. I suggest another perspective to use this social phenomenon for the benefit of the education system and to better empower newcomer students. The suggestion is to bring together newcomers who share similar interests and values to work together on a project, such as raising awareness against racism or Islamophobia. These projects could then be shared by the newcomers with local students. With teacher facilitation, these projects could become starting points of communication that bring an understanding and awareness on both the part of the newcomers and local students, fostering more positive connections and increasing opportunities for newcomers and locals to develop positive relationships based on their differences rather than always focusing on similarities.

This study included a diverse population of newcomers who represented a wide range of geographical regions such as East Asia, South Asia, Africa, Europe, South America, and the Middle East. All shared similar qualities related to immigration experiences, cultural diversity and values, and linguistic limitations. However, we cannot ignore the individual social and cultural differences that exist among newcomers. These differences emphasize the importance of understanding the unique experiences of newcomers with intercultural friendship formation and also highlight the need to extend research to focus on cultural differences and their impact on

same-ethnic friendship formation. Moreover, having more focused research from the perspective of different ethnicities and cultural groups will increase our knowledge of cultural differences, which will then inform how service and mental health care providers can work with these groups across different modalities in a sensitive and respectful manner that comprehends the uniqueness of each culture.

Finally, in the context of counselling practices, an important implication of the study highlights the importance of paying attention to the multiple identities represented among newcomer clientele, as well as to therapists' own identities (Arthur, 2019). Newcomer students, in this study and in general, exhibit intersectionalities which make competency in multicultural counselling a critical aspect for therapists. For example, Aya, who did not speak English fluently, held an Islamic faith, and wore a hijab, encountered Islamophobia and felt that she was discriminated against because of her faith and dress choice. By acknowledging Aya's cultural identities and her stressful experiences, much can be offered from within the multicultural counselling framework to both her and to others who may have had similar experiences. A therapist could create a space to explore these intersectionalities and allow students to reflect on their new environments. Reflections could be prompted by asking newcomer students questions about their identities and social locations, and how they feel these qualities facilitate or hinder their adjustment process. In return, a therapist would get to reflect on their own multicultural counselling skills and social advocacy competencies (Arthur, 2019). Taking a culturally focused approach while being mindful of the consequences (perhaps traumas) that such a depth of reflection might elicit could be a beneficial and rewarding experience for both newcomers and therapists.

### ***Limitations***

All participants in this study were identified as females, due to difficulties in recruiting males for the original study (Zhao et al., 2017). This is a major limitation, and the study may not apply to all newcomer students; other genders may have different friendship dynamics, experiences, and perspectives on intercultural friendship. Research on the influence of homophily and shared common characteristics of adolescent friendship choices has concluded that gender, race, and social class are among the qualities that determine friendship preferences (Echols & Graham, 2013). Due to the lack of gender variability in the sample, there was no opportunity to examine the role that gender may have played in intercultural friendship selection among newcomer students in Canadian high schools. The role of gender is a subject that should be addressed in greater depth in future research.

A second limitation of this study is related to the limited linguistic competency of some of the newcomer participants when responding to the interview questions. The semi-structured interview Zhao et al. (2017) used for data collect was suitable for this study as it allowed for elaboration, expansion, and illustration on the thoughts, situations, scenes, circumstances, and experiences newcomers may have come across throughout their interactions with other students. The open-ended questions in particular allowed newcomers to share what they wanted with the interviewers. However, despite the flexibility and versatility offered by the semi-structured approach, knowledge of the English language is required to fully engage and interact with interview questions and provide extensive details of one's lived experiences. Therefore, as might be noted in some of the quotes, some participants were limited when sharing ideas, struggled to explain their thoughts in a coherent manner, or failed to use precise terms to elaborate on their experiences.

As an ESL individual and a student, I strongly relate to the previously mentioned experiences with limited linguistic competency. Occasionally, I find myself thinking in my native language, Arabic, but speaking in English, which requires extra effort to align the two languages in order to solidify and express my ideas and thoughts. I also noticed this happening in multiple instances when I listened to the newcomers' interviews. As suggested by Slobin (1996), each participant exhibited a unique subjective orientation to the world which was evident through the way they thought and spoke. Slobin (1996) provided a good description of the discrepancy one might experience between thought processing and verbal expression due to language insufficiency: "It will be recognized that in each language only a part of the complete concept that we have in mind is expressed, and that each language has a peculiar tendency to select this or that aspect of mental image which is conveyed by the expression of the thought" (p. 72). Although I do not believe these limitations have greatly impacted the findings, it was sometimes challenging for participants to elaborate on certain ideas, which might have prevented the interviewers from extracting more information connected to their experiences.

### ***Future Directions***

The data was collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it did not account for the impact of virtual learning on friendship formation and social interaction dynamics in a virtual setting. Since we are currently dealing with high levels of unpredictability in terms of global health and political emergency states, it is an important future direction to consider virtual learning delivery and its social and cultural contexts. It is necessary to understand the challenges that may arise while creating online social interaction opportunities for students. For example, class separation that occurred as a result of ESL classes in an in-person setting reduced the likelihood for newcomer and local students to socially interact. This likelihood is further reduced

in online settings. It would be intriguing and beneficial to examine the dynamic of forming intercultural friendships in an online platform.

Other directions for future studies include addressing the question of balancing formal language education, such as ESL classes, with newcomer students' need for intercultural friendships. It was evident from this study that newcomers are willing to establish social connections with local students when provided with the right circumstances, such as availability, physical proximity, shared interests and values, or joint school projects. A future direction would be to introduce an intervention design that creates one or more of these circumstances to examine the effect on facilitating friendship establishment and continuation. Such a study would extend the findings from this study about factors that hinder or promote friendship-making in a specific intervention, and would assess the usefulness of intervention designs to promote social integration. Additionally, future research can introduce factors that were not part of these findings. For instance, in their article, Tong et al. (2006) suggested ten ways to promote cross-cultural relationships. One way was to learn basic greeting words from newcomers' native languages. This simple gesture would make newcomers feel welcomed and included (Tong et al., 2006). Moreover, by initiating such a supportive bond from local students toward newcomers, the local students would be taking an active role in the social integration process rather than taking an observer role. Similar initiatives will not only involve local students in the friendship formation process, but also make the locals take responsibility for their own feelings and actions and be expressive about this, thereby relieving newcomers of the responsibility of interpreting locals' responses and/or predicting their reactions.

Finally, future study should consider examining the experiences of local students, such as those interviewed for Zhao et al.'s (2017) larger project. Examining local students' perceptions

of intercultural friendship formation with newcomer students in light of the two primary research questions posed in this study is crucial for understanding the obstacles that inhibit friendship formation from the perspective of local students. This knowledge will aid in gaining a comprehensive grasp of the existing social interaction dynamics and their limitations, allowing for the identification and implementation of solutions. In particular, if these elements are identified, the findings will help to explain some of the study's queries, such as why newcomer students perceive themselves as taking on more responsibility in developing social connections with local students and whether local students reciprocate these efforts.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the multilevel factors that impede or facilitate the development of intercultural friendships between newcomer and local students. Moreover, the study explored strategies shared by newcomers on what they expect from fellow newcomers, local students, teachers, and school administrators to facilitate social integration. The findings revealed a breadth of newcomer students' responses pertaining to the major roles that intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural factors play in deepening our understanding of the challenges newcomers face with intercultural friendships. Additionally, the social integration concept was found to have possible implications for this study on interventions and policies at the individual, educational, and institutional levels. Overall, this study contributes to the literature on newcomer youths' social integration and the importance of intercultural friendships by extending our knowledge about newcomer students' experiences with friendship formation in Canadian high schools. This knowledge can help school-based practices, counselling interventions, and policymakers consider more socially and culturally sensitive approaches to incorporate newcomer students into the Canadian education and social systems.

I am concluding this study by reflecting on the story about the ESL teacher that I told in the introduction to this thesis. One might think that it is a casual story, having small talk with a nice lady on a sunny day in Calgary. That's possible, especially because the teacher was nice and easy to talk to. However, I will play the devil's advocate for now and present an analysis of this story from a newcomer perspective. The student in this ESL teacher's class seemed to have an outgoing personality because he engaged in casual talk with his teacher by asking about her weekend plans, or perhaps he was actively working on practicing his English. Socially, the student took initiative to create a social interaction with the ESL teacher. Culturally, the student may have been trying to learn about relationship maintenance after separation in a Canadian context. This suggests the teacher kept an open dialogue and connection with her students. Linguistically, and I think this is the critical area because language acquisition takes a long time, there are additional challenges the student may have faced with new or unfamiliar words. (Note: I had never heard of an "exit-husband" before this story.) These challenges could include facing judgment, becoming a target for bullying, or losing privacy when his story is shared casually with a stranger at a bus stop one sunny, Calgarian day.

To conclude, this seemingly random, simple story is neither random nor simple. This story illustrates many of the factors identified through the various themes that arose in this study. For example, this story shows that newcomer students take an active role in their learning and their social integration overall. It also reflects the important role of teachers in the learning process, and of newcomer students having cultural sensitivity support during the integration process. In my opinion, this story highlights why it is crucial to invest in teachers' and school educators' cultural training because they are the architects of making positive change in the lives

of newcomer students, as well as local students, due to the powerful role they play in youths' daily lives and interactions.

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## Appendix

### Inter-Cultural Friendship in Canadian High Schools: Interview Guide

#### Introduction

Thank you very much for meeting with me today. Before we start, I want you to know that there are not right or wrong answers to my questions. The best and most helpful answers are your true opinions. Everything you tell me is confidential.

#### I. General Information

1. What grade are you in?
2. When did you come to Canada? As international students, immigrants, or refugees?
3. Are you with your parents here? [If not] How do you like living with your homestay family? Do you talk with them a lot? What are the things you do together?
4. What do you find most challenging in being a newcomer here?
5. Do you feel you present yourself to others in a different way here than in your own country? (For example, some students feel they are quieter here; others say there are more outgoing here than in their own country. Do you share such experiences?)

#### II. Intercultural Peer Interaction

6. What made you decide to participate in this interview?
7. How do you feel about the peer relationships between newcomers and local students in your school? Are there a lot of interactions between the two groups? Can you tell me some stories, good or bad, that you have noticed or have been told?
8. Do you have any personal experiences like what you have told me? What happened? How did you feel at the time? What did you do? How do you think about it now?

- III. Friendship Cognition & Experience (explore issues of making friends, deepening a friendship, trust and closeness, conflict and conflict resolution, jealousy, termination)
9. When we use the word “friend”, what do you think we refer to?
  10. Are there persons you consider to be close friends in your school?
  11. How did you get to know this person? Is this friend an international student or a Canadian student?
    - [newcomers] What is his/her home country? How long has he/she lived in Canada?
    - [if Canadian student] What are the ways that you are similar to each other?
  12. Is it easy or hard to **make friends** with other international students or with Canadian students? Why? Why is it sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ (the opposite)? What kind of person would find it easy to make friends with people from a different cultural background? What kind of person would find it difficult to do so?
  13. In what ways can international students meet local students and make connections at school, i.e., through clubs, teams, classes, volunteering, opportunities to meet or eat lunch together? Specifics?
  14. How do you make connections? How can international students and local students go from just hanging out in class to doing things after school/weekends? What are the good ways to make friends with other international students or Canadian students? What are the things to keep in mind?
  15. You mentioned A as a close friend. Was there a particular occurrence that made this person a friend rather than an acquaintance?
  16. Why do/did you consider this person your friend [qualities, interests, activities, etc.]? What are the qualities of an ideal friend?

17. What do/did you do together? Have there been situations that your friend did something or said something that made you uncomfortable or upset you? Vice versa? What did you about it?
18. How content are you with this friendship? What would you describe as problem areas?
19. What is trust in friendship?
20. What makes two friends feel really close to each other?
21. Can people be friends even if they have arguments? How should arguments be settled between good friends? What kinds of things do good friends sometimes fight or argue about? Could you give examples?
22. What makes a friendship break up? Can you give me an example based on your experience? What makes a friendship last?
23. In what ways are your friendships at home different from your friendships here [either with other newcomers or with local students]?
24. How do you think the school can help newcomers and Canadian students become friends?