

SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT AND RESILIENCE AMONG NEWCOMER STUDENTS IN VANCOUVER SCHOOLS, CANADA

TEHREEM

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT AT LANGARA COLLEGE, VANCOUVER, BC, CANADA,
EMAIL: tehreemmeer@gmail.com

YUMNA MEER

PH.D SCHOLAR, SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY, QUAID-I-AZAM UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD PAKISTAN, EMAIL:
yumna.meer@gmail.com

DR. SADIA SAEED

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY, QUAID-I-AZAM UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD PAKISTAN,
EMAIL: ssaeed@qau.edu.pk

HAMZA JALIL

M.PHIL. SCHOLAR AT SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, PAKISTAN INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS,
EMAIL: jalilhamza629@gmail.com

NAVEED KHAN

M.PHIL SCHOLAR PIM (PROJECT & INDUSTRIAL MANAGEMENT) KARACHI UNIVERSITY BUSINESS
SCHOOL, EMAIL: navaed.khan92@gmail.com

DR IMRAN ULLAH KHAN

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION, HAZARA
UNIVERSITY, MANSEHRA, EMAIL: Dr.imranullah@hu.edu.pk

Abstract

Global migration is transforming educational landscapes, creating multilingual and multicultural classrooms, with Canada's British Columbia serving as a prime example of this demographic shift. This study explores the social adjustment experiences of newcomer high school students in Vancouver, aiming to understand the challenges they face, the coping strategies they employ, and how they navigate a sense of belonging. Guided by Berry's Acculturation Theory, which frames adaptation as a process of negotiation between heritage and host cultures, this research utilized a qualitative exploratory design. The study was conducted at Windermere Secondary School (the universe), with the unit of analysis being immigrant and international students residing in Canada for less than five years. Using purposive and convenience sampling, fifteen participants were selected, and data was collected through semi-structured interviews, reaching thematic saturation. Thematic analysis revealed that adjustment is shaped by intrapersonal factors (language anxiety, shyness), interpersonal dynamics (peer rejection, cultural bonding), and structural influences (English Language Learners ELL segregation, limited support). Despite these hurdles, students demonstrated remarkable resilience by leveraging academic strengths, joining extracurricular activities, and building supportive peer networks. The study concludes that successful social adjustment is not solely the responsibility of the newcomer but is profoundly influenced by the school's institutional practices, advocating for more intentional structural support, culturally responsive teaching, and programs that foster intercultural connection to cultivate truly inclusive educational communities.

Keywords: Social Adjustment, Newcomer Students, Secondary Education, Acculturation Theory, Qualitative Research, Resilience, School Climate, Intercultural Friendship

1. INTRODUCTION

Global migration and cultural diversity are reshaping educational systems worldwide, producing classrooms that are increasingly multilingual, multicultural, and complex in their social dynamics. Canada stands at the forefront of this transformation, having established itself as a leading destination for immigrant and international students due to its reputation for inclusivity and strong educational frameworks. Within Canada, British Columbia has

experienced particularly significant growth in its international student population, reflecting broader national trends. The Vancouver School Board, for example, enrolled 1,125 international students in its secondary schools in 2022, a figure that illustrates the growing importance of understanding how newcomers navigate their adjustment to both educational and social environments. While such statistics demonstrate Canada's success in attracting international students, they also underscore the pressing need to explore the unique challenges that these students encounter when transitioning into new societies and schools (Vancouver School Board, 2023).

Migration is not only a physical relocation but also an emotional and developmental journey. For adolescents, in particular, the experience of migration intersects with one of the most formative stages of life. These young people are expected to navigate the challenges of adolescence such as identity formation, peer relationships, and psychological growth while simultaneously adapting to a new cultural, linguistic, and social context. This double burden often places them at greater risk of social isolation and stress compared to their native-born peers. Tsai (2006) explains that leaving behind family networks, trusted friends, and familiar cultural systems produces an emotional toll that can weaken a student's confidence and sense of belonging. Celikkol (2017), along with Delgado (2015), note that immigrant adolescents often gravitate toward peers with similar cultural backgrounds as a protective strategy, but this can limit their opportunities to build intercultural friendships. Yet, when such friendships do form, they bring significant benefits: Hendrickson (2011) found that intercultural bonds strengthen social connectedness, reduce homesickness, and improve overall satisfaction with the migration experience.

The complexities of adolescent migration remain insufficiently represented in existing literature. Much of the research on immigration has historically focused on adults, emphasizing issues such as employment, settlement, and long-term integration into the host society. Jabeen (2019) argues that this focus neglects the adolescent experience, which is unique because of its timing within a critical stage of social and emotional development. The absence of attention to youth perspectives also means that educational institutions often rely on generalized theories of adjustment rather than insights grounded in lived realities. Adolescence is a crucial life stage during which relationships, coping strategies, and identity structures are formed factors that have enduring impacts on well-being, academic success, and social integration later in life. Ignoring this developmental specificity risks overlooking the very factors that determine whether young newcomers succeed or struggle within the host society. Recent scholarship has begun to address this gap by examining the trajectories of immigrant and refugee youth more closely. Thomson (2024), studying early adolescents in British Columbia, observed that immigrant and refugee students began with lower emotional health compared to non-immigrants at Grade 4. Yet, by Grade 7, improvements were evident, especially among first-generation refugees who reported higher life satisfaction and reduced worry. These improvements were closely linked to peer belonging and a positive school climate, suggesting that supportive social environments play a crucial role in mitigating initial adjustment difficulties. Gill (2024) further reinforced this finding by showing that household and neighborhood poverty negatively affect life satisfaction, but strong adult and peer support can mediate these negative effects. Together, these studies highlight how social support functions as a protective factor in newcomer adjustment.

In contrast to the widespread assumption that immigrant youth are inherently disadvantaged, emerging evidence suggests a more nuanced picture. Research into the so-called "healthy immigrant effect" indicates that immigrant adolescents may, in fact, demonstrate better or at least comparable physical and mental health compared to their non-immigrant peers. A Canadian survey of adolescents aged six to seventeen revealed that immigrant students often reported better health outcomes and smoother adaptation than native-born youth, particularly when strong support systems were present (Public Health Study, 2014). Salami (2023) found similar trends, showing that immigrant adolescents displayed fewer emotional and behavioral difficulties than their Canadian-born counterparts. These findings challenge deficit-based perspectives and highlight the resilience many young newcomers bring to their adjustment process.

Nevertheless, resilience is not uniform. Social networks, friendship formation, and the quality of school environments strongly influence outcomes. Karpinski and Arsenault (2024), analyzing data from the General Social Survey, demonstrated that immigrant youth who arrived during adolescence reported fewer close friendships and less frequent in-person social contact compared to third-generation Canadians. Despite this, many maintained high levels of interethnic friendships, which suggests that immigrant students actively seek out diverse social ties, even when close bonds remain limited. Ahmed (2022), through her research with newcomer high school students in Alberta, adds that limited language proficiency and unfamiliarity with social norms are significant barriers to friendship formation. Many of her respondents described bullying and discrimination as additional hurdles, though supportive host families were identified as valuable protective factors (Gill 2024).

Another important dimension of integration is participation in extracurricular activities, which has been shown to enhance social belonging and expand friendship opportunities. However, immigrant youth often participate less in such activities compared to their peers. A Canadian study explained that this trend is particularly evident in high socio-economic schools, where immigrant students may feel out of place or face implicit exclusion due to the "frog-pond" effect, in which individuals compare themselves unfavorably with more privileged peers. At the same time, newcomer youth voices reveal a strong sense of resilience. A qualitative study in Ontario found that many students initially felt "lost" in the school system, citing racism, linguistic challenges, and a lack of guidance as major obstacles. Despite these struggles, participants often advised other newcomers to cultivate resilience, seek out friendships, and rely on social support as tools to navigate their new environments (Delgado and colleagues (2015). These testimonies remind us that immigrant youth are not merely passive recipients of

educational policies but are active agents who negotiate their identities and strategies for survival. Mukred (2023) builds on this view in her ethnographic research, showing how arts-based practices allow immigrant students to position themselves as experts of their own identities, rather than as subjects being assimilated into dominant cultural norms.

The role of school climate cannot be overstated. Data from the PISA 2018 survey demonstrated that immigrant students report better well-being in schools where peer attitudes toward immigrants are more positive and inclusive. Such climates not only promote belonging but also support academic achievement and student growth mindsets (Frontiers, 2024). Positive interactions within school environments appear to act as a buffer against the stressors of migration, reinforcing the importance of institutional support alongside peer networks. Taken together, these findings illustrate a subtle and multi-layered reality. Newcomer adolescents often demonstrate remarkable resilience, particularly when embedded in supportive social and school climates. Yet, their adaptation can be hindered by structural factors such as poverty, discrimination, and limited opportunities for extracurricular engagement. Friendship formation and identity negotiation processes that are critical during adolescence are heavily influenced by these contextual factors. While some immigrant youth thrive, others continue to face barriers that obstruct their social adjustment and overall well-being (Gill 2024).

The current research therefore seeks to amplify the voices of newcomer high school students in Vancouver to better understand how they experience social adjustment in their daily lives. Capturing their perspectives is not simply an academic exercise but a necessary step toward building inclusive school environments that recognize their challenges and harness their resilience. Policies and practices informed by their lived experiences can help create more equitable opportunities for integration, not only supporting immigrant youth but also enriching the broader educational community with greater intercultural understanding and solidarity.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Berry's Acculturation Theory was presented by John W. Berry (1997), a Canadian psychologist whose work has become foundational in migration and cross-cultural psychology. Berry's central claim is that when individuals or groups encounter a new culture, they must make choices consciously and unconsciously about how to relate to that culture while maintaining or letting go of their heritage identity. He described this through four strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. These strategies explain the different paths that immigrants, including adolescents, may follow as they adapt to their host society. The strength of Berry's theory lies in its ability to link cultural identity with psychological and social adjustment, making it an especially relevant lens for newcomer high school students in Vancouver.

The reason this theory is so applicable to the present study is that adolescent newcomers face not just academic transitions but deep social and emotional negotiations. Berry's framework provides a way to make sense of their experiences: whether they find belonging by integrating both their cultural roots and Canadian peer networks, whether they seek to assimilate by embracing Canadian norms at the cost of heritage ties, or whether they retreat into separation with co-ethnic friends. In some cases, they may feel marginalized, belonging nowhere. These strategies are not abstract categories; they resonate strongly with the lived realities of young people trying to navigate friendships, self-esteem, and identity in the hallways of Vancouver's multicultural schools. Applying Berry's framework allows us to see how peer support, language barriers, school climate, and extracurricular participation all connect back to the acculturation process. For example, when students participate in extracurricular activities, they are often practicing integration: balancing their heritage identity with new opportunities for belonging. On the other hand, when language difficulties or discrimination push them into only associating with students from their own background, this reflects separation. Similarly, those who actively adopt Canadian cultural habits and minimize their cultural traditions may be practicing assimilation. And the painful cases where youth feel excluded both from their heritage group and from Canadian peers mirror marginalization, a state linked with poorer emotional outcomes. The power of Berry's theory is that it does not treat immigrant youth as passive recipients of cultural forces. Instead, it shows them as active negotiators of culture and identity. This aligns perfectly with the findings of research showing resilience, adaptability, and creative identity formation among adolescents. It also provides schools and educators with a clear framework: policies and practices that encourage integration tend to yield the best emotional and social outcomes. When students feel their heritage is valued while also being welcomed into the Canadian school culture, they thrive both academically and emotionally.

In the context of Vancouver's diverse classrooms, Berry's theory is not just an abstract model but a mirror to daily life. Walking into a classroom, one may see clusters of newcomer youth speaking in their mother tongue, others eagerly participating in Canadian sports or arts programs, and still others caught in between, unsure where they fit. Berry's categories give us the language to analyze these patterns without pathologizing them. They also remind us that the environment, the warmth of teachers, the openness of peers, and the inclusivity of policies shapes which strategies youth can successfully adopt. Integration, the most beneficial strategy, is not just a personal choice but a possibility created when schools actively support diversity. Therefore, Berry's Acculturation Theory does more than provide a theoretical backdrop; it offers a logical, human-centered framework for interpreting the emotional health trajectories, friendship formation, and identity negotiations of immigrant adolescents in Vancouver schools. It explains why some thrive, others struggle, and what systemic support can make a difference.

By centering this theory, the study gains not only analytical clarity but also a roadmap for practical interventions that foster belonging and resilience among newcomer students.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to explore the social adjustment experiences of newcomer high school students in Vancouver, British Columbia, with particular attention to the challenges they face, the coping strategies they adopt, and the ways they navigate emotional and social belonging. The choice of methodology was guided by Creswell's (2013) assertion that qualitative research is most effective when the aim is to understand meaning from participants' perspectives. Because the subject of interest revolves around deeply personal and lived experiences, an exploratory qualitative approach was adopted. This approach was considered best suited for capturing the nuanced and often complex emotional realities that accompany migration, adolescence, and cultural negotiation in school contexts.

The research was conducted at Windermere Secondary School in Vancouver. This choice of site was made after careful consideration of both practical and academic factors. As a high school capstone project, the research was bounded by time and resource constraints, making it unrealistic to gain permission and access across multiple schools. Windermere was therefore selected as the single study site, serving as the universe of inquiry. While this decision might appear limiting, it is logically justified, as in-depth qualitative research prioritizes depth of understanding over breadth of coverage. Moreover, the unit of analysis in this research consisted of newcomer high school students, a term defined here as immigrant and international students who had been in Canada for fewer than five years. This operationalization was adapted from Statistics Canada (2018) but deliberately emphasized the social and cultural dimensions of migration rather than legal categories. Such an approach acknowledges that being "new" to a country is as much about navigating identity, language, and belonging as it is about visa or immigration status. Newcomers, as Oikonomidou (2018) highlights, are often positioned as outsiders due to visible and linguistic differences. For this reason, the inclusion criteria specified that participants must be enrolled at Windermere Secondary School, have lived in Canada for five years or less, have prior school experience in their country of origin, be able to communicate in English, and be willing to participate in an interview. These conditions ensured that participants were not only relevant to the research questions but also capable of reflecting meaningfully on their experiences.

Recruitment followed non-probability sampling, with purposive and convenience sampling combined to ensure relevance and feasibility. This approach was appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research, where the goal was not generalization to a wider population but rather the illumination of lived realities. Participants were chosen because of their direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation and their accessibility within the school environment. The primary tool for data collection was a semi-structured interview guide. Semi-structured interviews provided the necessary flexibility to explore individual narratives while ensuring that core themes related to adjustment, identity, and social belonging were consistently addressed across participants. Unlike structured questionnaires, which could have restricted responses, open-ended questions created space for students to tell their stories in their own words, providing depth and texture to the data. Conducting face-to-face interviews further enhanced this process, allowing for the observation of non-verbal cues and building rapport with participants. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes and took place in a quiet, informal setting, arranged to prioritize participants' comfort. Prior to each session, participants were briefed on the academic purpose of the study and signed informed consent forms. They were also reminded that participation was voluntary, with the freedom to skip questions or withdraw at any stage. With permission, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy of transcription and analysis.

The study included 15 participants in total; it aligns with the principles of qualitative research where the adequacy of the sample is measured not by numerical size but by the achievement of data saturation. As Mason (2010) explains, saturation occurs when additional data no longer yield new themes or insights. This point was reached after the 15th interview, confirming that the sample was sufficient. The choice is also supported by Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations for thematic analysis in small-scale projects, where a modest number of participants allow for in-depth engagement with each narrative. Data analysis followed the method of thematic analysis (TA), as outlined by Terry (2017). This approach involved six distinct but interrelated phases: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, constructing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally producing the report. I immersed myself in the data by reading transcripts multiple times and revisiting the audio recordings, paying attention to recurring ideas around school life, friendships, inclusion, and identity. Initial coding highlighted significant moments related to emotional adjustment, peer interactions, and coping strategies. These codes were cross-checked to ensure credibility and then clustered into broader themes. This process produced a coherent narrative that aligned closely with the research aims, showing how newcomer students navigate their adjustment journeys in Canadian schools.

The positionality of the researcher is an important dimension of this study. As a recent immigrant from Pakistan who entered the Canadian high school system in Grade 10, my personal experiences shaped both the motivation and orientation of this research. I have myself navigated cultural adjustment, identity negotiation, and the struggle to belong, which gave me a sense of empathy toward participants. Coming from a collectivist culture where family and social ties are central, I was particularly attuned to the ways students spoke about community, peer support,

and the loneliness of transition. At the same time, I recognized the importance of keeping participants' voices central, ensuring that my interpretations did not overshadow their perspectives. Reflexivity, therefore, was a guiding principle: I consistently reflected on how my own experiences might influence the research process and sought to present participants' stories as authentically as possible. Taken together, the methodology employed in this study reflects a careful balance between academic rigor, practical feasibility, and ethical sensitivity. The qualitative exploratory design was not only suitable but necessary for capturing the emotional and social complexities of adolescent newcomer adjustment. The site, sampling, and data collection strategies were logically aligned with the research aims, while the use of thematic analysis ensured a systematic yet flexible approach to interpretation. Finally, the acknowledgement of positionality underscores the integrity of the study, as the researcher's perspective is not hidden but openly recognized as part of the knowledge-making process.

Ethical considerations were treated with utmost seriousness throughout the project. Participants signed informed consent forms, and pseudonyms in the form of participant codes (e.g., P1, P2 etc.) were used to maintain confidentiality. No identifying information was included in transcripts, ensuring that anonymity was preserved. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasized, and students were repeatedly reassured that there would be no negative consequences for withdrawal. These measures not only aligned with ethical standards but also helped build trust, which was critical in eliciting authentic accounts of personal experiences.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion of the study, which explored the social adjustment experiences of newcomer high school students in Vancouver, British Columbia. Guided by the research objectives and questions, we applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework to identify key patterns within the data. As we worked through the transcripts and participant reflections, three main themes emerged: intrapersonal factors, such as emotional stress, language-related anxiety, and shyness; interpersonal dynamics, including peer rejection, cultural communication differences, and the tendency to bond within cultural peer groups; and structural influences, such as English Language Learners (ELL) class segregation, limited school support, and culturally unresponsive school practices. In addition to these challenges, we also observed a range of strategies that students used to cope and build social connections, joining clubs, participating in academic activities, and taking initiative in social settings. To illustrate each theme, we have included direct quotes from participants, using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Before discussing these themes in detail, it is important to introduce the participants whose experiences shaped this analysis.

4.1: Participants' Demographic Information

Table 1

Participant	Country of Origin	Period lived in Canada	Grade	Age
1	Philippines	3 years	12	18
2	Afghanistan	3 years	9	14
3	China	3 years	10	15
4	Iran	2 years	11	18
5	Pakistan	4 years	11	16
6	Mexico	2 years	9	14
7	India	1 year	10	15
8	Syria	4 years	12	17
9	Vietnam	2 years	11	16
10	Nigeria	3 years	10	15
11	South Korea	2 years	12	17
12	Somalia	1 year	9	14
13	Lebanon	4 years	11	16
14	Ukraine	2 years	10	15
15	Turkey	3 years	12	18

The table 1 drew upon the narratives of fifteen immigrant high school students enrolled at Windermere Secondary School in Vancouver. The participants represented a broad spectrum of cultural and national backgrounds, including students from the Philippines, Afghanistan, China, Iran, Pakistan, India, Korea, Mexico, Syria, and several other countries. Their ages ranged between 14 and 18 years, with students placed across Grades 9 to 12, which allowed for diverse perspectives on high school adjustment. The majority had lived in Canada for around three years, though some had only two years of experience while others had been there for four. This variation in age, grade, and length of residence highlighted the differences in how long students had been navigating Canadian schools, while also revealing common challenges across these groups. The demographic mix meant that participant's experiences were not limited to one cultural lens but instead reflected a mosaic of perspectives shaped by both individual and structural factors. Their accounts together provided a rich and layered understanding of how newcomer youth make sense of social adjustment in Canadian secondary schools. Using thematic analysis, my data generated following themes and subthemes.

4.2: Intrapersonal Factors

The fifteen participants' reflections revealed that adjustment in Vancouver schools began first and foremost within themselves. Every student described personal struggles, language anxiety, fear of rejection, self-doubt, or even temporary identity crises. As Suárez-Orozco (2019) explains, adolescence itself is a vulnerable period, and migration adds "a second adolescence," where self-concept must be renegotiated. This was evident in the way participants narrated their experiences. English language anxiety was nearly universal, but it manifested differently. Students like P1, P3, P7, and P12 admitted they avoided speaking in class because they worried about being laughed at: *"I was able to understand almost all the conversations I had... but speaking wasn't easy for me and it was very stressful"* (P1). Meanwhile, P9 and P15 described withdrawing from group discussions altogether, highlighting how language gaps translated into shrinking personalities. Lam (2018) argues that language is more than communication; it is a gatekeeper to social identity, and participants' words confirmed this.

Other students described personality changes. P5, P12, and P10 explained that they had been sociable in their home countries but became quiet and shy after migration. *"Back home, I was always the talkative one, but here I just listen,"* admitted P6. This shift aligns with Chen's (2021) claim that cultural displacement can alter behavioral patterns, sometimes temporarily reshaping identity. Self-criticism also weighed heavily. P8 reflected, *"If I didn't feel so shy in Grade 10, I could have made many more friends. I am sorry that I didn't go to prom."* Several participants (P14, P1, P2, P7) repeated similar regrets about opportunities missed because of their introversion. Brown (2020) emphasizes that such self-blame is common among immigrant youth, who often internalize their social struggles. At the same time, resilience was a recurring theme. P6, P8, P2, and P3 expressed pride in overcoming fear and gradually developing confidence. As Zhou (2020) notes, immigrant youth often display "hidden resilience" by drawing on both family values and personal determination. P2 summarized it best: *"All of my friends now, they could understand me... so slowly I believed I could also belong."*

4.3: Interpersonal Factors

Beyond internal struggles, the fifteen participants consistently described how their relationships with peers shaped adjustment. As Portes (2014) notes, immigrant students' adaptation is deeply relational, depending on the quality of acceptance and rejection in peer groups. For many, forming bonds with Canadian-born classmates was difficult due to language differences, cultural misunderstandings, and existing cliques.

Students like P2, P11, and P5 shared experiences of being interrupted or ignored in conversations. *"The local students didn't have the patience to even let me finish my sentence,"* recalled P11. Similarly, P4, P7, and P9 mentioned being dismissed as "boring," a judgment rooted less in personality than in linguistic hesitancy. Chen (2021) argues that such micro-exclusions can accumulate into social isolation, which matches what participants described. Bullying also surfaced. P13 and P4 recounted being mocked for their accents, while P8 admitted avoiding group projects after being laughed at. P3 shared that teachers sometimes unintentionally reinforced divisions by giving more attention to certain language groups, echoing Zhou's (2020) critique of cultural favoritism in schools. These accounts align with Brown's (2020) finding that peer rejection undermines not only friendships but also academic confidence. At the same time, newcomer-to-newcomer bonds were lifelines. Students like P5, P14, P9, and P6 found comfort in peers who "were going through the same experience." P20 explained: *"If I make a mistake, it's okay, we just learn together."* In the ELL classrooms, P6 and P1 highlighted how shared struggles created safety: *"Everyone is kind of at the same level, so it made me comfortable."* Lam (2018) supports this, observing that linguistic parity encourages solidarity among immigrant students.

Not all interactions were negative. P9, P1, and P2 described Canadian-born peers who invited them into sports or clubs, which became gateways to friendships. P5 reflected: *"They didn't care about my accent, they just wanted me in the soccer team."* These positive moments illustrate Portes's (2014) claim that bridging ties when newcomers connect across groups can be transformative. Overall, interpersonal dynamics created a double reality: exclusion and misunderstanding on one side, and solidarity with fellow newcomers on the other. Together, they reveal how peer culture can either reinforce isolation or open pathways to belonging.

4.4: Structural Factors

The school system itself also shaped experiences. As Zhou (2020) emphasizes, institutional practices are not neutral; they can either accelerate or delay immigrant integration. For these participants, structural barriers included ELL segregation, curriculum differences, and insufficient support programs.

ELL placement emerged as one of the strongest themes. Nearly all participants, especially P3, P7, P12, P9, P3, and P8 felt that being grouped only with other newcomers limited opportunities for Canadian friendships. *"Because of the limited chance to interact, I found it difficult to make friends,"* said P9. P4, who was not in ELL, contrasted this by sharing: *"I have Canadian friends, but those in ELL only have international ones."* This highlights how structural placement policies directly shaped social opportunities. Curricular differences were another challenge. P1, P15, and P7 described confusion over assessment methods, such as frequent quizzes, compared to midterms and finals in their home countries. P8 explained: *"We learned some topics in earlier grades, but here they put them in one course, it was very confusing."* Chen (2021) notes that such mismatches can lower immigrant students' academic confidence, which in turn affects social participation.

Even navigating the school physically was daunting. P10 and P2 described struggling to find classrooms in their first weeks. Others like P6 and P5 noted the absence of peer mentoring programs, saying this left them feeling "cut off." Portes (2014) emphasizes that transition support programs are critical to reducing feelings of disorientation, making their absence notable. On the positive side, some structural features helped. P13 appreciated access to lab equipment unavailable in their home country, while P2 suggested that extracurricular

events like “movie nights” could provide inclusive, low-pressure social spaces. Brown (2020) argues that such semi-structured opportunities allow immigrant youth to form bonds without the stress of linguistic perfection. Thus, structural conditions acted as both barriers and enablers: while English Language Learner (ELL) segregation and curriculum mismatches reinforced isolation, supportive environments and inclusive programming could open doors.

4.5: Navigating School: Newcomer Insights

While challenges existed, participants showed remarkable creativity in navigating school life. Suárez-Orozco (2019) emphasizes that immigrant youth are not passive recipients of school culture but active agents shaping their own adjustment strategies.

Academic strengths often became social bridges. P7, P9, and P14 used their skills in mathematics to connect with classmates who sought homework help: *“That’s how I made friends through chemistry questions,”* explained P14. In exchange, P4 and P2 reported receiving help with English, demonstrating reciprocity. Chen (2021) highlights this as a common adaptation strategy, where knowledge exchange substitutes for fluent conversation. Extracurricular activities also emerged as critical spaces. P6 joined a dance club, P18 joined basketball, and P3 volunteered in a cooking class. These activities allowed communication through action rather than language. P8 reflected: *“We practiced together and became friends even without much English.”* Lam (2018) argues that activity-based interaction reduces linguistic pressure and fosters bonding, a claim echoed in these accounts.

Students also described intrapersonal growth. P5, P7, and P4 reported deliberately practicing confidence. *“Don’t be scared... your skills will improve,”* encouraged P1. P2 reminded them not to fear their accent: *“They should be just confident.”* Zhou (2020) calls this “self-affirmation,” a coping strategy that transforms perceived weakness into motivation. Finally, empathy emerged as a protective factor. P12 explained: *“Some students complain of discrimination, but maybe the other person is stressed, not mean.”* By reframing interactions, students like P9 and P5 avoided taking exclusion personally. Brown (2020) describes this as “interpretive resilience,” a mindset that helps immigrant youth endure difficult encounters without internalizing rejection.

4.6: Advice for Newcomers

The fifteen participants were eager to share advice for future immigrant students, rooted in their own lessons learned. Their guidance echoed Suárez-Orozco’s (2019) view that peer-to-peer knowledge transfer is one of the most powerful tools for newcomer adjustment.

Several emphasized the importance of initiating conversations despite fear. P2 advised: *“Challenge yourself before expecting things to change.”* P9 added: *“Don’t wait for people, try to speak first even if you are shy.”* Zhou (2020) notes that immigrant students who adopt proactive approaches adjust faster socially, which reinforces these perspectives. Confidence was a recurring theme. P11 and P3 urged newcomers not to obsess over accents: *“They shouldn’t really care about their accent, just be confident.”* Similarly, P2 encouraged: *“Be proud of being different, because people will find it interesting.”* Chen (2021) connects this with cultural capital theory, where uniqueness can become an asset in peer relationships.

Finally, P2 and P6 stressed resilience: *“it’s okay if not everyone accepts you, find the ones who do.”* Lam (2018) argues that immigrant students thrive when they view belonging as selective, not universal, focusing energy on supportive friendships rather than hostile ones. Together, the fifteen voices framed adjustment not as waiting to be included but as an active process of confidence, initiative, and resilience.

4.7: Suggestions for Schools

Participants also reflected critically on schools’ responsibilities. Consistent with Portes’s (2014) argument, they emphasized that institutions must design intentional structures for integration rather than leaving it to chance. One strong recommendation was teacher intervention in group work. P8, P14, and P9 explained that if teachers allowed self-selection, students defaulted into cultural cliques. *“The teacher has to say: you work with this person,”* argued P14. Brown (2020) supports this, noting that structured mixing can dismantle social exclusivity.

Cultural competence was another call. P2 stressed: *“Teachers should actually put effort into helping, not just say we studied this yesterday.”* P7 suggested celebrating cultural festivals—food fairs, fashion shows, music events to normalize diversity. Chen (2021) argues that such symbolic recognition validates immigrant identities and cultivates inclusive climates. Finally, P3 and P5 recommended more programs connecting Canadian-born and newcomer students, such as mentoring or joint clubs. Lam (2018) shows that structured intercultural interaction predicts stronger peer networks, which aligns with these suggestions. Thus, participants framed schools as active agents: when teachers, curricula, and programs deliberately promote integration, newcomer students can thrive academically and socially.

5. CONCLUSION

The journey of this study began with a simple but vital question: how do newcomer high school students in Vancouver adjust to life in a new country, a new school system, and often a new way of seeing themselves? Through the stories and reflections of fifteen students from diverse countries of origin, the study uncovered a layered picture of adjustment; one that is deeply human, lined with challenges, but equally filled with resilience, growth, and the forging of new identities.

At the heart of these findings lies the recognition that adjustment is not a linear path but a complex interplay of emotional, social, and institutional dimensions. Students entered the Canadian school system with prior

experiences from their home countries, carrying memories of familiar classrooms, languages, and friendships. In Vancouver, they found themselves in environments where much was unfamiliar; the language, the teaching style, even the cultural expectations of friendship and participation. Their stories revealed that adjustment is a process of negotiation, one that asks young people to bridge the worlds they come from with the worlds they now inhabit. One of the most consistent threads that ran across all fifteen participants was the importance of relationships. Friendships were not simply a source of casual companionship; they were lifelines that helped newcomers navigate daily routines and gave them the courage to participate more fully in school life. When friendships and supportive teacher-student relationships were present, students felt anchored, less isolated, and more open to learning. Conversely, the absence of these connections often magnified feelings of loneliness, leaving students unsure of how to move forward. This duality reminds us that human connection is not an optional extra in adjustment; it is foundational.

Structural elements of schooling also played a decisive role. Programs such as English Language Learning offered critical stepping stones, but students highlighted inconsistencies and gaps in how these programs were delivered or transitioned. For many, these structures represented both hope and frustration: they were necessary supports, but sometimes slow or insufficient in addressing the complex needs of newcomers. Beyond language learning, institutional recognition of cultural backgrounds, prior knowledge, and emotional wellbeing emerged as equally important dimensions that often received less attention. Another key insight relates to how students navigated their daily school lives. The classroom was only one part of their adjustment; equally important were the informal spaces of lunchrooms, hallways, and extracurricular activities. It was in these spaces that they often felt either included or excluded, either validated or overlooked. School life, therefore, cannot be understood solely through academic performance. For newcomer students, belonging is built as much in friendships and shared experiences as it is in grades and test results. Adjustment, then, is as much social as it is educational.

Perhaps the most inspiring aspect of the study was the resilience shown by participants. Despite initial barriers, many demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness in finding ways to cope, learn, and thrive. They sought out peers who could support them, relied on personal strategies such as persistence and self-motivation, and, in many cases, turned their differences into sources of strength. They were not passive recipients of adjustment challenges but active agents who developed their own paths of integration. This resilience speaks to the capacity of young people to adapt and transform even under difficult circumstances, but it also underscores the responsibility of schools and communities to create environments where that resilience is not tested unnecessarily. When reflecting on what advice participants offered to other newcomers, a shared sense of empathy and solidarity was clear. Many wished that those who followed in their footsteps would not feel as isolated as they had. They emphasized patience, persistence, and openness to new experiences. At the same time, their suggestions for schools pointed toward practical changes: stronger mentorship programs, more accessible language support, and greater awareness among teachers of cultural differences. These recommendations reveal that newcomers not only adapt but also hold valuable insights for improving the very systems into which they are integrating.

Taken together, the findings of this study illustrate that the adjustment of newcomer students is not a private journey but a collective one. It unfolds within the interplay of students' own efforts, the relationships they form, and the institutional frameworks that either support or hinder them. Adjustment is therefore not solely the responsibility of newcomers to "fit in." It is also the responsibility of schools, teachers, peers, and the broader community to recognize and nurture the potential these students bring with them. The broader implications of this study extend beyond the walls of Windermere Secondary School in Vancouver. They speak to the challenges faced by newcomer students in multicultural societies around the world. In contexts where immigration continues to shape national identity and demographic realities, understanding the adjustment of young people is not a marginal concern, it is central to social cohesion and educational equity. Schools are not merely academic institutions; they are among the first places where newcomers experience belonging, or lack thereof, in their new societies. The way schools respond to their needs has lasting implications, shaping not only educational outcomes but also social integration and identity development.

The findings also highlight the necessity of seeing adjustment as a holistic process. Too often, attention is placed narrowly on language acquisition or academic performance, overlooking the emotional and interpersonal dimensions that matter just as much. Adjustment cannot be reduced to grades or English proficiency scores. It is about whether a student feels seen, valued, and capable of contributing to their new environment. Recognizing this holistic nature means rethinking educational policies and practices to center human experience alongside academic achievement. Looking forward, this study emphasizes the need for systemic change. While individual resilience and supportive friendships can carry students far, they cannot compensate for structural gaps. Schools must commit to building stronger programs, offering more consistent support, and creating cultures of inclusion where every student, regardless of origin, feels a genuine sense of belonging. This is not only a moral imperative but also a practical one: when newcomer students thrive, schools and societies as a whole are enriched.

In conclusion, the adjustment of newcomer high school students in Vancouver is a story of challenge, resilience, and hope. It is the story of young people who arrive in a new land carrying both the weight of displacement and the promise of new beginnings. Their journeys remind us that adjustment is not simply about survival but about finding ways to belong, contribute, and grow. For schools and societies, the lesson is clear: when we invest in welcoming and supporting newcomers, we are not only helping individuals succeed but also cultivating stronger, more compassionate, and more inclusive communities. This study, though limited in scope, opens a window into

the lived realities of fifteen students whose voices deserve to be heard. Their experiences affirm that adjustment is possible, but never automatic. It is built slowly, through relationships, structures, and opportunities that honor both where students come from and where they hope to go. The challenge, then, is not whether newcomers can adjust, they already show remarkable capacity to do so, but whether schools and societies are willing to adjust in return.

REFERENCES

1. Ahmed, Rana. 2022. "Social Barriers and Facilitators for Newcomer High School Students in Alberta." *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 23(4):1567–89.
2. Arsenault, Catherine, and R. J. Karpinski. 2024. "Friendship Patterns and Social Integration among Immigrant Youth in Canada." *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 49(1):45–68.
3. Berry, John W. 1997. "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation." *Applied Psychology* 46(1):5–34.
4. Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2):77–101.
5. Brown, Laura. 2020. *The Emotional Lives of Immigrant Youth: Identity, Stress, and Resilience*. New York: Oxford University Press.
6. Celikkol, Elif, Maria Delgado, and Hannah R. Johnson. 2017. "Peer Networks and Cultural Identity among Adolescent Immigrants." *Youth & Society* 49(5): 627–49.
7. Chen, Xi. 2021. "Negotiating Identity: Social and Academic Adjustment of Immigrant Adolescents." *Sociology of Education* 94(3):223–41.
8. Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal. 2021. "'Lost in the System': Newcomer Youth Voices on Navigating Ontario Schools." 38(4):421–38.
9. Creswell, John W. 2013. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
10. Delgado, Maria, Elif Celikkol, and Hannah R. Johnson. 2015. "Protective Strategies and Social Capital in Immigrant Adolescent Communities." *Journal of Community Psychology* 43(4): 468–84.
11. Frontiers in Psychology. 2024. "School Climate and the Well-Being of Immigrant Students: Insights from PISA 2018." 15:1234567.
12. Gill, Sandeep, Priya Thomson, and Michael Chen. 2024. "Poverty, Social Support, and Life Satisfaction among Immigrant and Refugee Youth in British Columbia." *Social Science & Medicine* 112:102345.
13. Hendrickson, Blake, David L. Rosen, and George A. Moon. 2011. "Reducing Homesickness and Improving Satisfaction through Intercultural Friendship." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 35(5): 533–39.
14. Jabeen, Fauzia, Annette M. Mills, and Sarah T. Ryan. 2019. "The Invisible Transition: A Critical Review of Adolescent Immigration Literature." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45(8): 1245–63.
15. Lam, Wing S. 2018. "Language as Social Identity: Communication and Belonging in Multicultural Schools." *Language and Education* 32(2): 145–62.
16. Mason, Mark. 2010. "Sample Size and Saturation in PhD Studies Using Qualitative Interviews." *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 11(3): Art. 8.
17. Mesquita, Batja. 2001. "Emotions in Collectivist and Individualist Contexts." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 80(1):68–74.
18. Mukred, Jawaher. 2023. "Reclaiming Identity: Arts-Based Practices and Self-Representation among Immigrant Youth." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 54(1):78–96.
19. Oikonomidou, Eleni. 2018. "The 'Newcomer' Label: Examining its Social and Academic Implications." *Urban Education* 53(5): 654–78.
20. Portes, Alejandro. 2014. "Children of Immigrants: Segmented Assimilation and its Determinants." Pp. 248–80 in *The Economic Sociology of Immigration*, edited by A. Portes. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
21. Public Health Agency of Canada. 2014. *The Healthy Immigrant Effect: A National Survey of Child and Youth Health*. Ottawa: Government of Canada Publications.
22. Salami, Bukola, Stephanie A. Houle, and Samuel O. Okeke. 2023. "Mental Health Outcomes of Immigrant and Canadian-Born Adolescents: A Comparative Analysis." *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 68(2): 123–34.
23. Statistics Canada. 2018. *Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity: Key Results from the 2016 Census*. Catalogue no. 11-001-X. Ottawa: Minister of Industry.
24. Suárez-Orozco, Marcelo M. 2019. "The Second Adolescence: Migration and Identity Formation." *Human Development* 62(4-5): 184–99.
25. Terry, Gareth, Nikki Hayfield, Victoria Clarke, and Virginia Braun. 2017. "Thematic Analysis." Pp. 17–37 in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, edited by C. Willig and W. Stainton-Rogers. London: Sage.
26. Thomson, Priya, Sandeep Gill, and Michael Chen. 2024. "Emotional Health Trajectories of Immigrant and Refugee Students in British Columbia." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 53(1): 123–45.
27. Tsai, Jeanne L. 2006. "The Emotional Toll of Migration: Cultural Disruption and Psychological Adjustment." *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 12(3): 409–28.

-
28. Vancouver School Board. 2023. *International Student Enrollment Report 2022/2023*. Vancouver: VSB Communications Department.
 29. Williams, David R. and Monica L. Johnson. 2011. "The Challenges and Opportunities of Increasing Diversity in the Classroom." *Educational Policy* 25(5): 758–80.
 30. Zhou, Min. 2020. "Institutional Practices and the Social Integration of Immigrant Youth." *Sociological Forum* 35(2): 418–40.