

*Investigating the Phenomenon of School  
Integration: The Experiences of Pre-Service  
Teachers Working with Newcomer Youth*

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**Abstract:** Newcomer youth (i.e., immigrant and refugees) in Canada face barriers as they navigate school integration. While teachers have been identified as a source of support in this process, there is little formal education to train teachers on providing integration support to newcomer youth in the school system. The purpose of the following study was to investigate pre-service teachers' experiences and perspectives regarding involvement and the provision of support for newcomer youth in the school systems. Employing a descriptive phenomenological methodology, and utilizing a school integration framework, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 pre-service teachers. Analysis revealed five general structures, (a) understanding culture/background, (b) supporting language transition, (c) adapting/modifying teaching style, (d) teacher preparation, and (e) roles additional to teaching. Implications for teachers and service providers that identified student characteristics, environmental and teaching considerations and gaps in current teacher training as important factors that contribute to pre-service teachers' experiences supporting school integration for newcomer youth.

**Résumé:** Les jeunes nouveaux arrivants (immigrants et réfugiés) au Canada sont confrontés à des obstacles

académiques, culturels et linguistiques lorsqu'ils intègrent un nouveau système scolaire. Les élèves identifient les enseignants comme source de soutien tout au long du processus d'intégration scolaire, mais les enseignants ne se sentent pas nécessairement préparés à répondre aux besoins des nouveaux arrivants. Cette étude explore l'intégration scolaire, du point de vue des enseignants en formation initiale. En utilisant une méthodologie phénoménologique descriptive, des entrevues qualitatives ont eu lieu avec 10 enseignants en formation initiale. L'analyse des données a révélé cinq structures générales: a) comprendre la culture / contexte culturel; b) soutenir la transition linguistique; c) adapter / modifier l'enseignement; d) former les enseignants; e) entreprendre des rôles supplémentaires. Des implications pour les enseignants et les conseillers scolaires sont présentées.

## Introduction

Canada is renowned for welcoming newcomers, defined as permanent residents (including people who have received "approval-in-principle" from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to stay in Canada), refugees (protected persons), and temporary residents (including student, worker, or temporary resident permit holders; (Canada Revenue Agency, 2024). Canada's foreign-born population has noticeably increased since the 1950's, with an increase in diversity among individuals entering coming to the country due to changes to immigration policy in the 1960s (Salehi, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2016). Indeed, migration is currently the largest contributor to population growth across the country, and many of those arriving are children and youth. According to the 2021 Canadian census, there were 697,701 non permanent residents that arrived in Canada for the 2022/2023 year (Statistics Canada, 2024) with 1.6 million of the newcomers in Canada between the ages of 15-24 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012).

For newcomer youth, schools are often the first point of contact with Canadian society, and success in education is a key indicator of how they are managing the transition to the host country (Cooper, 2014). However, newcomer youth face numerous barriers as they navigate the school system. Difficulty overcoming these barriers is associated with increased levels of depression and anxiety, school dropout, and involvement in criminal activity (Rossiter & Rossiter,

2009). While other researchers have investigated acculturation (Huffman-Gottschling, 2016; Shachner et al., 2017), adjustment (Shachner et al., 2017), and academic achievement (Areepattamannil & Freeman, 2008) to examine the key role of schools for adjustment among newcomer youth. An integration framework was used to guide the current research investigating newcomer experiences with school systems. In accordance with Agar & Strang (2008) integration is conceptualized as a bi-directional process that takes a holistic approach, considering factors that contribute to the integration of newcomer youth and their families. Gallucci (2016) highlighted that, in school systems, integration refers to phenomena including psychosocial wellbeing, academic performance, and English language learning. In support of Gallucci's conceptualization of school integration, authors have used school integration as a framework to consider multiple domains that contribute to adjustment including social, emotional, linguistic, and academic factors (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019; Kassan & Mukred, 2022).

Specific to school settings, authors have identified the influential role that teachers have in facilitating school integration and overcoming barriers in newcomer youth (Areepattamannil & Freeman, 2008; Gallucci, 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010b). Researchers found that newcomer youth identified teachers as both barriers and facilitators the process of school integration (Kassan et al., 2024; Gallucci, 2016; Naraghi, 2013). For some, teachers are a source of support, helping students to feel a sense of belonging, and to achieve academic success (Brown, 2014; Kassan et al., 2024; Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel, & Martin, 2009). However, students often reported that they did not feel adequately supported by their teachers (Kassan et al., 2024), and experienced discrimination within the classroom. Negative experiences such as these can impact school performance and student engagement (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007). Clearly, teachers play an important role in school integration, yet research focusing on teachers themselves suggests that they feel unprepared to work with newcomer students, and have difficulty engaging with them (MacNevin, 2012). Less is known about the perceptions of those training to be teachers, or *pre-service teachers*. While there has been an increase in attention to multiculturalism in teaching with various diversity courses being implemented in teacher training programs (Akiba, 2011) it is not yet clear how pre-service teachers understand the phenomenon of *school integration*, and how they perceive their role

within that process. Therefore, the research question addressed in this study was: *How do pre-service teachers perceive and describe their experiences of working with newcomers who are integrating into high school in Canada?*

## **Literature Review**

In alignment with the conceptualization by Gallucci, (2016) Gallucci & Kassan, (2019); Kassan & Mukred, (2022), *School integration* refers to the consideration of adjustment in multiple domains of school life including social connection, English language learning, academic performance, and emotional wellbeing. This is understood as a dynamic process of induction of newcomers into the school system, involving adaptation by the newcomer and the host school. As schools tend to be newcomer youths' primary point of contact with Canadian society, they serve as a key venue where integration into Canadian society takes place.

### **Experiences of Newcomer Youth**

Recently, researchers have begun to investigate newcomer student experiences with school integration and have shared the perspectives of both newcomer youth, parents, and school staff on a variety of newcomer youth experiences, such as: language barriers (Matejko et al., 2024; Vrdoljak et al., 2022); lack of resources (for teachers and students), decreased student support (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019) education (for teachers and peers) on how to welcome and work with newcomer youth joining the school system (Matejko et al., 2024; Vrdoljak et al., 2022); racism from peers, teachers, and other staff members (Matejko et al., 2024) social connection (Vrdoljak et al., 2022); identity exploration as youth integrate their new country of residence with existing cultural identity (Matejko et al., 2024); decreased trust in school systems (Matejko et al., 2024); and an increased need for independent learning due to lack of resources (Matejko et al., 2024).

### **Teachers' Experiences Supporting Newcomer Youth**

Bennouna and colleagues (2021) investigated teacher experiences supporting newcomer youth in Texas, Virginia, and Michigan. Teachers in this study discussed varying levels of comfort navigating social and emotional needs of newcomer students. Varying degrees of challenges related to teacher student ratios, decreased translation support, lack of support staff, and difficulty accessing learning tools (i.e. school computers). Finally,

opportunities to collaborate between family and school were identified as facilitative opportunities for integration. Furthermore, Gallucci and Kassan (2019) highlighted how high school experiences for newcomer youth can influence the trajectory into post-secondary education.

Pre-service teachers offer a unique perspective into school integration, as they have hands-on experience teaching newcomer students in practicums, and are immersed in training programs designed to develop their understanding of educational practices and policies (Goddard & Hart, 2007). The foundational coursework and practicums undertaken by pre-service teachers are critical entry points for determining how they understand their roles (Lastrapes & Negishi, 2012; Ryan, 2006). Various characteristics such as believing in students' ability to perform well academically, building on students existing knowledge, and having a deep understanding of students' cultural backgrounds (Sleeter, 2008) have been identified among teachers as approaches that support the educational process for newcomer students. Furthermore, the capacity to form supportive relationships with newcomer students has been identified as a key factor influencing student well-being (Brown, 2014; Walsh, Harel-Fisch, & Fogel-Grinvald, 2010). Despite these findings, in many cases teachers have difficulty forming supportive relationships with their students, citing time constraints, a lack of understanding of students needs, and difficulty forming intercultural relationships (Patel & Kull, 2011; Roxas & Roy, 2012).

The majority of research on teaching newcomer students has focused on the language learning aspect of teaching newcomer students, and while teachers acknowledge the importance of language learning, many have reported that they are inadequately trained to support language learning in a subject-based classroom (Faez, 2012). More recently, researchers have begun to explore culture and its implications within a classroom setting. Given the increasing diversity in classrooms, and the influential role teachers have in school integration (Areepattamannil & Freeman, 2008; Gallucci, 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010b) it is crucial that teachers develop an understanding of their students' cultures (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). Indeed, cultural awareness and culturally responsive teaching methods are associated with improved academic outcomes and engagement among minority students (Richards et al., 2007).

**Teacher Training with newcomer students**

In Canada, education is under the mandate of the provincial government, and as such, teacher training, and subsequently training on diversity and working with newcomer students varies across provinces and university programs (Crocker & Dibbon, 2008). Given the increasing diversity in North American classrooms, and the proliferation of research in multicultural education, there is an increase in opportunity for pre-service teachers to take some diversity-related courses. While these courses are found to change pre-service teachers' attitudes towards working in a multicultural setting, fostering positive beliefs about diversity, many teachers continue to report feeling unprepared to teach in a diverse classroom (Akiba, 2011; Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005; Levi, 2019; Li & Grineva, 2016). Furthermore, for some teachers, the lack of awareness or education on newcomer school integration may result in harmful perpetuations of Anglo-American cultural and social practices (Li & Grineva, 2016). Several approaches have been suggested to remedy this lack of preparation. For example, longer-term experiences with individuals from different cultural groups that allow for the development of relationships between teachers and members of non-dominant groups help to build awareness of cultural differences (Kumagai & Lypson, 2009; Lowenstein, 2009; Wear, 2003). Furthermore, Pre-service teachers that participated in Levi's (2019) study expressed a need to incorporate information on refugee issues into the pre-service curriculum, as well as training on practical strategies and support for refugee students. While this avenue of training is promising, it is not yet implemented widely. Indeed, research exists on models for teacher education with regard to diversity; yet the exploration of pre-service teachers' experiences of implementing their training, and their perceived role when working with newcomer students, remains largely missing from the literature (Lowenstein, 2009). In Hos and Kaplan-Wolff's (2020) study, the teacher was able to implement learner-centered teaching pedagogy despite using pre-scripted teaching materials by bringing awareness to refugee newcomer students educational, cultural, and English language histories.

Overall, it is evident that there are a number of challenges faced by newcomer youth as they enter the school system. It is clear that through this process, teachers are positioned as instrumental in supporting this transition, and having the ability to form supportive relationships and demonstrate an understanding of diverse student needs and cultural backgrounds can be a protective

factor for newcomer youth (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). Unfortunately, many newcomer students do not get the support they require from teachers (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009) and the perspectives of those who work with newcomer youth are largely missing from the literature on school integration. While several authors (Akiba, 2011; Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005; Levi, 2019; Li & Grineva, 2016) have investigated teachers' experiences working with newcomer students, the research on the experiences and perspectives of pre-service teachers remains segmented and sparse, and does not address practical experiences. Therefore, the aim of the current study is to holistically explore school integration of newcomer youth, as perceived and understood by pre-service teachers.

## Method

A descriptive phenomenology was employed to address the research question: *How do pre-service teachers perceive and describe their experiences of working with newcomers who are integrating into high school in Canada.*

The aim of descriptive phenomenology is to uncover the essence of experiences or, to determine what is common about the experience of the phenomenon being researched, in this case pre-service teacher's experiences with integrating newcomer youth into the school system, (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Essences can be gleaned from the analysis of rich descriptions (Giorgi, 2009). This approach emphasizes remaining close to participants' descriptions, to highlight the depth and complexity of experiences (Giorgi, 2009). This research is guided by the school integration framework, which is an emerging framework that highlights that the school integration process as complex and multifaceted process that acknowledges factors both within and external to the school environment as influential in the integration process (individual experiences and traits, family climate, and community environment, Gallucci, 2016; Kassan & Mukred, 2022).

## Participants and Procedures

Participants were 10 pre-service teachers from a western Canadian university in the province of Alberta. To ensure sufficient data was collected, interviews were conducted until saturation was reached, or the point at which information from further interviews appeared to be redundant (Green & Thorogood, 2014). Pre-service teachers

were eligible to participate if they completed at least one practicum in a classroom that included students who were new to Canada.

Participants were between 21 and 36 years old ( $M_{age} = 25.8$  years). Four participants identified as male, and six as female. Participants identified as middle or upper-middle class, and endorsed a range of religious beliefs. Six participants were born outside of Canada. Nationalities represented were Canadian, American-Canadian, Greek, Korean, and Vietnamese. Collectively, participants spoke 11 languages. Participants were at various points in their training at the time of their interview. Nine participants were enrolled in a Bachelor of Education program, six of whom were in an after-degree program and had previously completed at least one degree. One participant was completing a Master's of Education. Including students at varying points in their programming allowed for diverse perspectives to be represented. Following ethical approval, participants were recruited through convenience sampling (Robinson, 2014; Suri, 2011), via an email sent to students in the Faculty of Education. Participants took part in one-on-one, 60 minute semi-structured interviews with a member of the research team. The interview guide included questions regarding: participant's background, experience of school integration, needs of newcomer youth as they integrate, and teacher experience and preparation. Participants received a \$20 honorarium for their time.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis was conducted using Giorgi's (2009) systematic steps for analyzing descriptive phenomenological data. This method allows for a deep understanding of participants' experiences, while remaining close to content provided by participants. The steps were as follows. Digital recordings of interviews were transcribed. The researcher read each transcript, to get a sense of the experience as described. Next, interview data was separated into meaning units, where each unit described a unique psychological experience. Each meaning unit was then examined and expressed in a way that highlighted the participant's psychological experience. These expressions were arranged into general structures and constituents. Each participant's interview was summarized to consolidate themes, and to allow for member checking (Langdridge, 2007). The final step involved generating the general structures of the experience that were common across participants. Following the analysis, peer auditing was conducted (Schwandt, 2015), wherein a



researcher new to the data was provided with the raw data as well as the meaning units and psychologically sensitive expressions. The auditor reviewed the categorization to confirm or suggest changes. Finally, member checking was conducted, to obtain feedback from participants and verify the accuracy of findings (Schwandt, 2015). Each participant received the summary of their interview to review, and was given the opportunity to provide feedback. All participants who responded confirmed that the summary matched their experience.

### **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines for rigor and trustworthiness were used which include: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. Credibility, or the accuracy with which the participants' experiences are reflected in the results (Cope, 2014), was ensured through member checking and peer debriefing (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Transferability, or generalizability in qualitative research, was addressed by stating participants' demographic information and describing to whom results might be applicable. Dependability, or consistency with which the same results would emerge given similar conditions, was addressed by keeping a clear audit trail of decision-making during the research process (Shenton, 2004), as well as through consultation with the research team (Schwandt, 2015). Finally, confirmability, or ensuring participants' perspectives were represented, was addressed through member checking, and including quotes from participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Members of the research team also engaged in reflexivity and bracketing, to ensure that their experiences and perspectives did not interfere with data analysis (Giorgi, 2009).

## **Results**

Analysis of interviews revealed five general structures. The structures were: (a) understanding culture and background, (b) supporting language transition, (c) adapting/modifying teaching style, (d) teacher preparation, and (e) roles additional to teaching. See table 1 for a summary.

Table 1  
*Summary of Structures and Constituents*

Structures	Understanding Culture and Background	Supporting Language Transition	Adapting/Modifying Teaching Style	Additional Roles Outside the Classroom	Teacher Preparation
Constituents	Determining Students' Cultural Background	English Proficiency Impacts School Integration	Assessing Student Adjustment to Curriculum	Supporting Initial Integration	Degree Preparation
	Diversity within the school	ELL Programming	Modifying Materials and Assignments	Facilitating Social Integration	Practicum Experience
	Navigating Cultural Differences	Availability of Resources	Building Relationships	Knowledge of Community Programs	Acquiring Additional Experience
	Incorporating Culture into Teaching and Learning		Utilizing Different Teaching Techniques	Liaising with Parents and Families	Personal Experience as a Newcomer

### Understanding Culture and Background

Participants spoke about their perception of the importance of understanding newcomer students' culture and background. The following four constituents emerged, (a) determining students' cultural background, (b) diversity within the school, (c) navigating cultural differences, and (d) incorporating culture into teaching and learning.

#### Determining students' cultural background.

Participants noticed that students' cultural background, demographics, and circumstances of migration impacted school integration, particularly their readiness for schooling, priorities with regards to schooling, and parental expectations. Even factors such as gender impacted the ease of integration. Further, pre-service teachers found that understanding the factors pertaining to culture and histories of newcomer students allowed them to identify those experiencing difficulties. However, while pre-service teachers recognized the importance of understanding their students' cultural background, they also cautioned against making assumptions. One participant, a 24-year-old male from the Philippines, explained:

You had to be careful because their previous history is all over the spectrum. Some of them have never been in schools, some of them haven't been in schools in a long time, so the really important thing to stress is how you approach them because some of them, if they're refugees may have seen traumatic things. One thing I noticed is that a lot of their behaviours, in a normal classroom, they're unacceptable. But you always have to remember that they don't know what it's like to be in the classroom.

**Diversity within the school.**

Pre-service teachers observed that when the host school was culturally diverse, students were better able to connect to the school community, whereas in school with less diversity, newcomer students tended to feel isolated. However, participants cautioned against making assumptions that students would want to connect primarily with individuals who share their cultural background. One 36 year old participant who emigrated from Romania drew on her experience as a newcomer student:

There is a tendency to assume that if you're from another culture you're going to be more comfortable with people from your own culture. ... And people do tend to gravitate together based on their cultural similarities. That makes sense, we are social beings. But they don't always want to. I actually wanted to work with someone from [another culture] but I never had a chance because these projects were all about my own culture, and maybe I didn't feel like celebrating my culture that much. After all, my parents left because life was not that great.

**Navigating cultural differences.**

In addition, pre-service teachers noted that it fell within their role to help students to bridge cultural gaps. Participants indicated that this role was challenging, particularly striking a balance between meeting newcomer students' diverse needs, while maintaining an equitable learning environment. It was crucial to not only be culturally knowledgeable, but also sensitive in the ways that they approached cultural differences in the classroom context. One participant, a 29-year-old female, shared:

Our Syrian refugee was not comfortable with working in groups with boys, and so trying to remember that and putting together groups ... trying not to make it seem like I was being preferential to her ... I really struggled to try to find that balance at the beginning, to make it fair but also supportive. And understanding, equal is not always fair...

### **Incorporating culture into teaching and learning.**

Participants noted that discussing culture served to enrich learning for all students, and highlighted newcomer students' strengths. On the other hand, participants grappled with how to incorporate culture into teaching in a way that did not alienate newcomer students. One participant, a 24-year-old male from the Philippines, shared, "if I put myself in their shoes I would just want to be treated normally."

### **Supporting Language Transition**

All participants spoke about how important they perceived English Language Learning (ELL) to be for newcomer students. The following three constituents were revealed, (a) English proficiency impacts school integration, (b) ELL programming, and (c) availability of resources.

### **English proficiency impacts school integration.**

Pre-service teachers noted that language proficiency played a key role in students' adjustment to schooling in Canada, in both the academic and social domains. Students with lower English proficiency faced additional challenges during the process of school integration, and benefitted from additional support from school staff. A 29 year-old participant shared:

A lot of them have learned some of the concepts in their own language, and so they're very frustrated because they're not achieving what they want, and they're not able to communicate their frustration, advocate for themselves, whereas they a hundred percent can in their own language... And if there is no one available to help transition that, if it's all Anglophone teachers without anyone that's able to do any translation, then I

think they get very frustrated and can become very introverted, closed off to their teacher and others.

**ELL programming.**

Participants indicated that their ability to support language transition was impacted by the type of ELL programming within the school. The types of ELL programming differed across schools, with some offering separate ELL classes, some offering one-on-one support for ELL students, and others lacking ELL programming altogether. Participants discussed the various costs and benefits associated with the types of ELL programming. A 25-year-old Canadian participant stated:

There's a lot of debate, but some teachers are of a mindset that having students that have a similar English language level and comprehension would be better off in the Canadian schooling system being taught together, but at the same time, that's segregating them. That's pointing out "you are different". So on one hand it would be easier to academically support these students but at the other hand, it's not providing that cultural and social integration that is a part of school.

Unfortunately, participants also shared that ELL classes that focused solely on language acquisition did not cover the content necessary to gain access to post-secondary schooling. Overall, participants felt that although the type of ELL programming available was largely outside of their control, they recognized opportunities to support language transition within the classroom.

**Availability of resources.**

Participants raised concerns with regard to large class sizes and availability of language learning resources (e.g. teacher's aides and language learning materials such as bilingual dictionaries). Even when resources were available, they were often not developmentally appropriate for older students, and students appeared to disengage in these cases. A 28-year-old female participant shared:

You see them try, struggle, and the teachers struggling to reconcile that they are so mature, and they've been through so much in one aspect of their lives. Yet they've

come to school and they're reading out of children's books to gain English proficiency...

### **Adapting and Modifying Teaching Style**

Participants recognized the need to modify their teaching style to meet the needs of their newcomer students. Within this structure, four constituents were revealed, (a) assessing student adjustment to curriculum, (b) building relationships, (c) modifying materials and assignments, and (d) utilizing different teaching techniques.

#### **Assessing student adjustment to curriculum.**

Pre-service teachers described the diversity of academic performance among newcomer students, wherein some did very well, but others had difficulty. They speculated that this variation might in part be due to differing pre-migration educational experiences, and recommended carefully assessing students' educational background. Participants also cautioned against making assumptions about newcomer students' academic ability without considering language proficiency. Further, they observed that some newcomers did not readily ask for help when struggling (either academically or with concerns such as health and finances), which they suggested may be due to cultural differences with regard to help-seeking, or lack of awareness of available resources. A 22-year-old male participant stated, "they don't normally seek academic help on their own, the teacher has to tell them where to go and where to be at what time before they take that step."

#### **Building relationships.**

Pre-service teachers explained that it was helpful to build relationships with newcomer students to better understand their experiences and needs, and to determine the most effective approaches for assisting them. A 21-year-old male participant shared:

You should try to connect with them in some way beyond being a lecturer. I mean, you're not a lecturer, you're a teacher so, it reinforced doing the dirty work of identifying what the issues are on that one-on-one level.

However, several participants discussed some of the challenges they faced in forming supportive relationships with newcomer students, particularly due to language barriers and cultural differences.

Participants observed that for some students, not having relationships with their teachers heightened their experience of isolation.

**Modifying materials and assignments.**

Furthermore, participants spoke about steps they took to provide academic support, including modifying assignments and teaching materials. Participants recognized that modifying grading rubrics, altering language used, and shortening assignments were helpful adjustments for newcomer students. Unfortunately, pre-service teachers had limited flexibility to modify assignments particularly for older students preparing for standardized exams. One 29-year-old female participant explained:

In grade 10 they start doing projects that mimic the diploma exams for three years later... And for newcomers who weren't tested that way, who learned a different curriculum, or who don't have the English skills, it puts them at a disadvantage, in their self-confidence, and among their peer group. They maybe view themselves or viewed by teachers as being less capable, because of this focus of the school system. If it was project or interest based, more personalized for the students... Then even though the language would still be an issue they could show, "I've done this part of the background before and this is where my strength is so I'm going to focus on that," and they could excel and show their strength more than we allow them to now.

**Utilizing different teaching techniques.**

Although they had limited flexibility to modify assignments, participants spoke about techniques that they found effective for working with newcomer students. Techniques included group work, building on students' existing knowledge, anticipating questions, devising multiple ways of explaining concepts in plain language, and using non-verbal communication. A 30-year-old male said the following of group work, "one of the biggest supports within the classroom are the students themselves. So grouping stronger students with lower level students, they can work together and help the other rise up."

### **Taking on Additional Roles Outside the Classroom**

Participants discussed their perceptions of roles outside of teaching that they took on when working with newcomer students. Four constituents were derived within the structure, (a) supporting initial integration, (b) facilitating social integration, (c) knowledge of community programs, and (d) liaising with parents and families.

#### **Supporting initial integration.**

Pre-service teachers spoke about newcomer students' initial arrival in Canada and explained that their students benefited from additional support at this time. They observed that many newcomer students felt isolated and overwhelmed, and tended to withdraw if they did not get support during what is often a challenging time. However, the support available differed across schools, and in many cases the orientation offered was not sufficient to ease students' nerves. This was particularly the case when there was a language barrier and no translation services were provided. Indeed, participants found that support offered over an extended period of time was more helpful for students. Participants recognized however, that despite initial challenges, the vast majority of newcomer students showed resilience and integrated successfully. A 36-year-old female participant explained:

Immigrants encounter numerous problems but for the most part they come very driven and in about seven years statistically surpass average Canadians. That's huge. ... So yes it looks hard, and yes it is. There's all of these problems, but we have many Canadians who are also going through incredible hardships, and to single out this particular kid because he needs help because he's from Russia is great, but realistically in one year you won't know the difference.

#### **Facilitating social integration.**

Pre-service teachers also spoke about their role in helping newcomer students make social connections, highlighting that friendships ease the process of school integration. A 22-year-old female participant explained, "Giving them opportunities to become friends, so maybe group work... Just providing those opportunities, that's important." Additionally, they spoke about their role in facilitating social integration outside of the classroom, ensuring students had access to extra-curricular activities, and determining



whether their students were socially isolated. Pre-service teachers also spoke about their role in fostering an inclusive environment within the school community. They found it useful to have conversations with students about diversity, empathy, and equality, although this was not explicitly part of the curriculum. They viewed these conversations as a way of equipping all of their students to better support newcomers.

**Knowledge of community programs.**

Participants also helped students connect with community resources, though this was often challenging as pre-service teachers were often unaware of the options in the community and felt they did not have adequate time to research such services. A 30-year-old male participant shared:

We have workshops that we take to gain more knowledge, but in addition to what's expected of a teacher as well as the individual time that can be spent one-on-one with a newcomer, it's really difficult to fit within that eight-hour day. ... The most difficult part is getting the word out there that these programs are available to the public ...

**Liaising with parents and families.**

Further, pre-service teachers spoke about working with newcomer families. They indicated that connecting with families helped to shed light on their newcomer students' previous experiences, background, and current needs. Getting to know families also allowed them to determine whether students were experiencing value conflicts between family or cultural values, and personal values or school values. Participants could also provide support and help families to address practical concerns such as finding housing, employment, or learning English. With regard to support, a 28-year-old female participant said:

If parents work night shifts or shift-work or don't speak English, I think that can be a challenge. When I was in school I would come home and my parents would help me with my homework and that is a big emphasis, "bring this home, do it with mom and dad." Whereas I think that can be a challenge for newcomers, because if their parents don't have

English proficiency or they are not available for whatever reason, whether they are divorced, or working multiple jobs, or have a lot of siblings, it can be a disadvantage for them if teachers aren't cognizant of that.

Pre-service teachers found that by liaising with parents and families, they were better able to understand their newcomer students' situations and needs, and provide effective support. However, they also recognized that with many students requiring support, they had limited time to connect with families, and those families were not always easy to reach due to their own demands.

### **Teacher Preparation for Working with Newcomer Students**

Participants spoke about the training they received to work with newcomer students. Within this structure, the following four constituents were revealed, (a) degree preparation, (b) practicum experience, (c) acquiring additional experience, and (d) personal experience as a newcomer.

#### **Degree preparation.**

Participants indicated that they received minimal preparation for working with newcomer students through their degree. Some participants took a course on diversity, in which they briefly discussed newcomer students, but the majority of participants felt that this course was too broad to adequately prepare them for the level of diversity they encountered in the classroom. The majority of their training to work with newcomer students centered on language learning, but did not cover issues such as cultural awareness, trauma, and promoting inclusion. A 22-year-old male participant shared:

We have a class on diversity, but that class is not strictly for newcomers, it's diversity of being sensitive to other ethnic groups that are already present in Canada and sexualities and all that other stuff. With that class, we could add a newcomer section and cultural awareness. ... There's some cultures where females would never look males directly in the eye... Just being more culturally aware and sensitive to the newcomers and how they interact with you, because it might be the norm where they're from.

**Practicum experience.**

Participants felt that their practicums were most helpful in building competence for work with newcomer students. They shared that it was particularly helpful when their mentor teacher was skilled and had experience working with newcomer students, though they noted this was not always the case. A 30-year-old male participant stated, “that was a big factor, getting out there, working on the front lines, one-on-one with students.”

**Acquiring additional experience.**

Despite the training they received, many participants continued to feel unprepared to teach newcomer students effectively, and took on additional work or volunteer experience to fill this perceived gap in their training. For instance, a 28-year-old female participant shared that through her volunteer work, she had the opportunity to pursue additional training that she used in her teaching practice. When asked what was valuable about this training, she elaborated:

An understanding of where these students are coming from, what their experiences might have been. Just so you're cognizant of these students that have spent years in refugee camps, what are some things that you need to be sensitive to, and also about their culture.

**Personal experience as a newcomer.**

Additionally, participants who were newcomers themselves noted that they relied heavily on their personal experiences to work with their students. They found that this helped them to foster empathy and connect with newcomer students. They also often shared their own story of integration to inspire and motivate students. Given the benefit of personal experience, several participants suggested that it would be valuable to add experiential learning components to teacher education programs. A 21 year-old male participant explained:

If you have an immigrant background, or a background similar to an immigrant, you've had an experience where you've had to go through a culture shock... I think you will be a little bit more sympathetic to the student, and understand it better ... Or even just lived overseas, or something as simple as you've had some sort of a

culture shock, some sort of a change you've had to encounter or deal with, you understand the mindset because there's no way you can scientifically explain this, it's an experiential learning thing.

## Discussion

The current study addressed pre-service teachers' perceptions of the experiences of newcomer youth entering North American school systems, framed within the emerging concept of school integration (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019; Kassan & Mukred, 2022). Participants revealed insights into their experiences with newcomer youth integrating into a new school context in Canada, and the roles they play in this process of school integration. The results can be understood in terms of pre-service teachers observations regarding the personal and systemic factors impacting school integration as well as the roles they may play in facilitating school integration among their students from a holistic perspective.

### Personal Factors

Pre-service teachers highlighted culture, language proficiency, and academic achievement as key factors impacting school integration. They recognized that larger cultural differences and language barriers made the process of school integration more challenging. These observations are supported in the broader literature on migration. Cultural integration is often stressful, but as pre-service teachers recognized, it can also be enriching, rewarding, and an individualized process (Schwartz, Unger, Zomaonga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Similarly, language-learning challenges described by participants are well documented, positioning language proficiency as a factor explaining the achievement gap between ELL students and their peers (Sheng et al., 2011). Indeed, pre-service teachers in this study noted that academic achievement among their newcomer students varied greatly, with some students excelling, and others struggling to adjust to the curriculum, often depending upon previous schooling experiences (MacNevin, 2012). This diversity can create challenges for teachers to adequately meet the needs of all of their students, and keep them engaged (Helfrich & Bosch, 2011). Importantly however, many newcomer students are motivated and highly value their education, often due to cultural values or lack of access to education prior to arriving in Canada (Gallucci, 2016; Shakya et al., 2010).

Notably, pre-service teachers recognized not only the challenges faced by their newcomer students, but also the resiliency and unique strengths they demonstrated. These strengths and resiliencies allow the majority of students to successfully integrate into various educational systems in Canada. Interestingly, these findings align closely with previous studies exploring the perspectives of newcomer youth themselves (e.g. Deckers & Zinga, 2012; Gallucci, 2016; Matejko et al., 2024; Naraghi, 2013). The convergence of findings suggests that pre-service teachers are making accurate observations that align with students' experiences, allowing them to identify and meet students' needs effectively. Furthermore, when teachers have a balanced perspective of their students, as participants in this study did, their students tend to perform better academically (Hos & Kaplan-Wolff, 2020; Sleeter, 2008; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2010). The current study thus presents a promising picture, suggesting that teachers entering the workforce are likely to have a nuanced view of their newcomer students, a view that allows them to effectively support school integration among their students.

### **Systemic Factors**

Pre-service teachers also observed that broader systemic factors impacted their newcomer students. Support from the family, the school system, and the community impact the process of school integration for newcomer youth (Gallucci, 2016; Gallucci & Kassan, 2019; Matejko et al., 2024; Nawyn, et al., 2012; Vrdoljak et al., 2022). Specifically, participants in this study discussed the challenges associated with variability of ELL supports across schools, difficulties reaching out to parents for greater collaborative support, limited communication between school personnel and community resources, to name but a few examples. Unfortunately, pre-service teachers expressed that they felt that many of the systemic factors were outside of their control. This feeling was particularly salient for the participants in this study, who were in the process of completing their teacher training and likely had less voice within the larger school system in which they had completed a practicum. Given the accuracy and depth of pre-service teachers observations of school integration, it may be helpful to empower teachers to work within the systems of which they are a part.

**Role of Pre-Service Teachers in School Integration**

This study also illuminated pre-service teachers' experiences of working with newcomers, and how these experiences have shaped their understanding of their roles, both as pre-service and practicing teachers. Pre-service teachers described their role as facilitating school integration. By providing opportunities for their students to learn about culture, make social connections, and build ties with the community, they may ease the integration process for their students (Choi, 2013). Pre-service teachers can also modify their teaching style where possible, tailoring it to the needs of their students, thus allowing for their students to remain engaged and perform well academically (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The role of pre-service teachers often extended beyond the classroom, and although they recognized the importance of their role, they indicated that it was often challenging to fulfill these roles given demands on their time (MacNevin, 2012; Roxas & Roy, 2012). Indeed, in recent years, teachers' workload has increased significantly, putting them at risk for increased stress and burnout (Meyer, 2010). Again, these experiences speak to systemic issues that need to be addressed within the profession of teaching. To address such broader issues, it may be beneficial for teachers to have access to staff members to support the process of school integration, including cultural brokers, school counsellors, and teachers' aides (Tatar, 2009).

**Pre-Service Teacher Training**

Research has shown that foundational education courses and practicum experiences in teacher training are entry points for determining how teachers shape their understanding of their role (Lastrapes & Negishi, 2010; Ryan, 2006). Pre-service teachers in the current study reported that they did not have adequate preparation to work with newcomer students. This finding is consistent with previous research, suggesting that North American pre-service teachers often struggle to manage diversity in their classes (Akiba, 2011; Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005; Levi, 2019). The majority of their training to work with newcomer students tends to focus on language learning, ignoring many key aspects of school integration such as tools to support newcomer students, an understanding of the newcomer experience, and the ability to communicate with newcomer student families to build a multi-environment relationship (Levi, 2019). Furthermore, focusing solely on language learning can also contribute to a deficit-based view of newcomer students (Escamilla, 2009). Thus, it can be recognized that language

can be a barrier to newcomer students learning and demonstrating knowledge and impacting integration, but it must be considered as a part of the integration process.

Pre-service teachers found their practicum placements to be the most helpful way to learn about working with newcomer students, but participants noted that their experiences varied based on the skillset of their mentor teacher. Therefore, it may be important to recruit skilled mentor teachers, particularly those who have experience working with newcomer students (Gambhir, Broad, Evans, & Gaskell, 2008). When they perceived gaps in their training, pre-service teachers acquired additional hands-on experience working with newcomer youth, or drew on their personal experience as newcomers. Indeed, experiential learning may be most valuable for building competence to work with newcomer students, as it allows one to make connections with diverse individuals, and reflect on one's own and other cultures (Lowenstein, 2009; Wear, 2003). Taken together, the results suggest that teacher training should incorporate theoretical learning with regard to newcomer students as well as longer-term opportunities for experiential learning alongside skilled mentors. Moving outside of the classroom, increasing the training of supervising teachers in practicum placements also seems critical, as these individuals presented key role models for the pre-service teachers in this study.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

It would be important to consider factors including the experience of pre-service teachers and the lack of discussion regarding participant SES when interpreting the current findings. Given that pre-service teachers are still "in training" they may not have a large breadth of professional teaching experience to draw from. However, within this participant group, there were collectively 11 languages spoken, and participants were able to speak to their own newcomer experiences. Furthermore, the lack of discussion around participant SES is a limitation as we cannot speak to pre-service teachers opportunities working with newcomer youth that were experienced or inhibited based on socio-economic factors.

This study has implications for teacher training, policy, and research. The current study provides support for the utilization of a school integration framework, as pre-service teachers highlighted factors that were helpful, or were perceived as useful with access and training. These included opportunities to gain insight into, or provide support for student history, cultural background, academic

history, community resources, collaboration with family members, facilitating social connections, and making a variety of instructional and content adjustments. Applying a school integration framework in teacher training programs may have promise in providing guidance for teachers and school staff to support school integration for newcomer students. Specifically, this could include pre-service teacher training programs that include courses addressing culture and working with newcomer students. A course of this nature may address managing trauma and bridging cultural gaps. Pre-service teachers may also benefit from learning methods of assessing needs that are culturally responsive (Patel & Kull, 2010). It could also be valuable to incorporate a multicultural competency component into teacher training programs, similar to training programs such as counselling (Psalti, 2007) or social work (Sue, Rasheed, & Rasheed, 2015). Furthermore, the study suggests that longer-term experiential components may help to build cultural awareness, as well as develop pre-service teacher empathy (Keengwe, 2010).

This study also reveals that pre-service teachers find themselves in multiple roles when working with newcomer students. These roles include teacher, support person, cultural broker, and family liaison, among others. While pre-service teachers recognized the importance of these roles, they also indicate that a lack of time and skills made it difficult to carry them out. Therefore, on a systemic level it may be important for teachers to have access to supports including teacher's aides, cultural brokers, and counsellors (Meyer, 2010; Yohani, 2013). For service providers (including counsellors, social workers, and psychologists), this study implies that schools may be a valuable venue for outreach work and making connections with families. It may also be helpful for teachers and service providers to work collaboratively within the school setting, as this would increase newcomer students' ability to access services.

Future research could explore teacher-training programs directly to better prepare teachers for working with newcomer students. Moreover, research could explore experiences of teachers and service providers who specialize in working with newcomer youth. Indeed, better understanding how teachers can successfully work with newcomer youth will allow educators, pre-service teachers, and policy makers to better facilitate school integration among this group, thus setting them up for success within the school system and beyond.



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