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# How Do Immigrant Students Develop Social Confidence and Make Friends in Secondary School? A Retrospective Study


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## How Do Immigrant Students Develop Social Confidence and Make Friends in Secondary School? A Retrospective Study

### **Abstract**

This paper pertains to a retrospective study of immigrant students' experience of making friends and gaining social confidence in secondary school. In the study, 17 undergraduate students participated in either a one-to-one semi-structured interview or focus group. Questions were asked to understand their experiences in making friends and gaining social confidence when they came to Canada between grades five to nine. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data. This method was useful in looking for commonalities in meaning in participants' responses. In total, seven themes and 20 subthemes were discovered, which are discussed in detail. Implications for school professionals are discussed along with suggestions for future research.

### **Keywords**

Immigrant, Adolescence, School, Social Confidence, Friendship, Thematic Analysis

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## How do Immigrant Students Develop Social Confidence and Make Friends in Secondary School? A Retrospective Study

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Just by looking around, it is obvious that immigration into Canada is increasing. As of 2011, over 6.8 million foreign-born individuals were residing in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011), many being immigrant children and youth. By 2014, over 48,000 children with permanent resident status under the age of 15 were estimated to reside throughout Canada (Government of Canada, 2015), while thousands of immigrant children have not been granted residency or received their citizenship. These children face unique difficulties in regards to social integration, language acquisition, cultural differences, transitioning to new schools, and stereotyping and prejudice. Further, they must learn to balance traditions from their old culture and new expectations of the host culture, as well as mediate the demands of their parents with the demands of their new culture (Cheng & Lee, 2013; Social Planning Council of Ottawa, 2010; Tyyska, n.d.).

For illustration, language comprehension is a significant difficulty for many new immigrants. The National Centre for Education Statistics (2004) found that 51% of immigrant students who had difficulty speaking English did not graduate from high school. Immigrant children are often forced to attend school before they adjust to their new home or learn the language skills they need (Social Planning Council of Ottawa, 2010). Possessing a low threshold of English comprehension severely interferes with their ability to learn new concepts, especially in a language that can take between three to seven years, or more, to acquire proficiency (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000).

Despite the above stressors, new immigrants report a higher sense of overall wellbeing, social and self-actualization, and purpose in life than national born citizens (Bobowik, Basabe, & Paez, 2015). However, even with these affirming aspects, they report a lower level of positive relationships with others (Bobowik et al., 2015). For example, Verbera (2015) identified immigrants' lack of positive friendships with others, while also showing that newly immigrated Mexican high school students benefitted from relationships with host peers helping them navigate the new school system and language barriers. However, most relationships that these new students were with other newly immigrated Mexican students who also spoke Spanish.

Positive relationships in general are necessary for a youth's normal development, let alone for youth who face structural challenges in succeeding with everyday life in both a new

language and country. Beyond any specific educational benefits for immigrant students, friendships enable a wide array of positive effects. These effects include, but are not limited to, increasing resilience, school adjustment, quality of life, and overall well-being, while also decreasing feelings of loneliness, depression, and social anxiety (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, Jaakkola, & Reuter, 2006; Oppedal & Roysamb, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Virta, Sam, & Westin, 2004; Werner & Smith, 2001). How immigrant youth develop the social confidence and friendships to enhance these effects and decrease these upsetting feelings is not well understood. Thus, in this paper we will report on a study of how immigrant students make friends and gain social confidence through the use of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

First, we provide a context for this collaborative study between an undergraduate student majoring in psychology (Author 1), a professor and supervisor (Author 3), and a doctoral student (Author 2). Then, we critically review the literature pertaining to immigrant students and social confidence, before explicating our study's methods of data collection and choice of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) for making sense of our data. We conclude by reporting findings and discussing implications for educators, school counsellors, and other school professionals aiming to support immigrant students in developing social confidence in secondary school and beyond.

### The Meeting

As a psychology undergraduate student (Author 1) near my last year of study, I contacted Dr. Tom Strong, from the University of Calgary, to take an independent research course, as his research interests paralleled mine. Then, Dr. Strong and I met with Author 2 (a doctoral student working with Dr. Strong) and collaboratively decided on the topic of social confidence in immigrant students. Author 1's interest related to Author 2's research pertaining to migrant students and their well-being at school. As a doctoral student specializing in educational leadership, Author 2 was specifically interested in migrant youth and how they take on leadership roles to advocate for others, particularly given her own background as a refugee and being educated in the Canadian school system. Over eight months of Author 1's research and weekly supervision meetings with both Author 2 and Dr. Strong, the study and results we next describe came to fruition.

### Background

Developing positive relationships that assist immigrant students to thrive is a complex challenge. According to Bukowski and Hoza (1989), friendship is defined as *reciprocated* positive feelings between individuals (i.e., given and returned; Bukowski & Hoza, 1989). While fundamental for any individual's success, friendships and support are especially important to new immigrants because quality friendships and positive attachment to others strengthen an individual's resilience to overcome difficulties in life (Werner & Smith, 2001). Immigrant students must address an enormous amount of change over a short period of time. Previous studies have found that social support is essential to immigrants' psychological well-being (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2006; Oppedal & Roysamb, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Virta et al., 2004). Further, support networks formed in the host country can impact well-being and buffer the negative effects of discrimination (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2006). As well, successful integration of the youth's old with new cultural identities can diminish feelings of discrimination while promoting higher psychological adaptation among immigrant youth (Costigan, Su, & Hua, 2009; Virta et al., 2004). Unfortunately, however, immigrant youth commonly suffer from higher levels of psychological distress and lower levels of social support

than native born students (Oppedal & Roysamb, 2004). In addition to these specific friendship commonalities, immigrant students also benefit from the universal effects of social support.

Not only do friendships provide specific support for immigrants, friendships with peers become more important during middle childhood, pre-adolescence, and adolescence (Berndt, 2004; Miller & Coll, 2007). During secondary school, there can be a marked decrease of parental support, while youth increasingly rely on friendships with peers for support (Berndt, 2004; Helsen, Vollenbergh, & Meeus, 2000; Scholte, Van Lieshout, & Van Aken, 2001). As a result, friendships during these times deepen by becoming more intimate, as youth share more personal information and provide more compassionate emotional support (Berndt, 2004; Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Helsen et al., 2000; Scholte et al., 2001). This friendship intimacy does not only become more common, it also becomes more important to typical psychosocial functioning. Intimacy and friendship quality during youth protects against loneliness, depression, and alienation—while enabling individuals to feel validated, wanted, self-confident, and receive anxiety-relief (Berndt, 2002; Cheng & Furnham, 2002; Nangle, Erdley, & Newman, 2003; Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Troop, 2008). Buhrmester (1990) examined relationships between friendship intimacy and psychological adjustment; specifically, sociability, hostility, anxiety/depression, and self-esteem. Adolescents whose friendships were rated as high in intimacy, or were described as “compassionate, disclosing, and satisfying,” scored higher overall on measures of interpersonal competency and psychological well-being (Buhrmester, 1990, p. 1108). Those in high intimacy friendships were “more competent, more sociable, less hostile, less anxious/depressed, and have a higher self-esteem compared to peers involved in less intimate friendships” (Buhrmester, 1990, pg. 1108). Similar findings were identified by Nangle, Erdley, Newman, Mason, and Carpenter (2003), Parker and Asher (1993), Oldenburg and Kerns (1997), and Bishop and Inderbitzen (1995).

Nangle et al. (2003) found that loneliness and depression were mediated by a child’s quality and quantity of friendships. Parker and Asher (1993) also found that the extent of participant loneliness was predicted by having a friend, friendship quality, and group acceptance. They found that the majority of children with few friends still had best friends; however, their friendships were rated lower on quality. This resulted in children with fewer friends reporting a higher level of loneliness compared to children with more friends. Similarly, Oldenburg and Kerns (1997) discovered that an individual’s popularity, or quantity of friends, as well as their quality of friendships both independently influenced depressive symptoms. Finally, Bishop and Inderbitzen (1995) found a significant link between friendship and self-esteem, though having more friendships did not increase an individual’s self-esteem when compared to others having fewer friendships. In other words, an individual only had to have one person they considered a friend in order to reap the associated benefits of higher self-esteem.

Friendship is also a primary source of support and positive coping strategies, which is beneficial to both youth and immigrant students during times of rapid change and heightened stress (Erdley, Nangle, Newman, & Carpenter, 2001). Crockett, Inturbide, Torres Stone, McGinley, and Raffaelli (2007) found that acculturative stress in immigrant students related to higher levels of depression and anxiety. However, Crockett et al. also found that active coping, parental support, and peer support diminish an individual’s levels of depression and anxiety.

Friendship intimacy also affects students’ academic outcomes (Berndt, 2004; Berndt, Hawkins, & Jiao, 1999; Bond et al., 2006; Vaquera & Kao, 2008). Students’ adjustment to junior high school, specifically with respect to sociability and leadership, increased over the school year if the student had high quality friendships (Berndt, Hawkins, & Jiao, 1999). Also, students in reciprocated friendships reported higher levels of school belonging, with both school belonging and reciprocated friendships affecting academic performance (Vaquera &

Kao, 2008). Finally, students with good school and social connectedness reported lower levels of anxiety, depression, substance use, and were more likely to complete secondary school (Bond et al., 2006).

In addition to reducing loneliness, depression, and anxiety, and increasing self-esteem and school performance, friendships have also been shown to influence social anxiety. La Greca and Harrison (2005) found that peer crowd affiliation, positive qualities in best friends, and romantic relationships all mediated social anxiety. Greco and Morris (2005) similarly found that social anxiety in middle childhood was related to low peer acceptance and low social skills – a relationship moderated, for girls, by friendship quality.

While some of these above studies examined the general student population, their findings are applicable to immigrant students. For example, a specific form of social anxiety related to immigrant students is intergroup anxiety, which is defined as a fear of negative evaluations by the self, by the in-group, or by the out-group, such as through rejection or embarrassment (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Anxiety is lessened with positive previous contact with the out-group, meta-perceptions, the situation, and previous personal experience (i.e., meta-perceptions are how one thinks others see you, Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Consequently, this anxiety leads to an enhanced state of self-awareness, informational processing biases, amplified reactions, and opposing evaluations of out-group members (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Stephan and Stephan surveyed Hispanic college students regarding their attitudes and knowledge towards Anglophone students, while also measuring their intergroup anxiety towards Anglophone students. Intergroup anxiety, stereotyping of Anglophones (i.e., the out-group), and perceived dissimilarity with the Anglophones (i.e., the out-group) were found to co-occur with low levels of contact with the Anglophones (i.e., the out-group). Similarly, when cross-cultural friendships were facilitated with individuals reporting heightened fears of being rejected due to their race, their cortisol reactivity (i.e., stress), decreases through meetings with cross-cultural friends (Page-Gould et al., 2008). As well, their prior cross-cultural contact also mediated scores on measures of cortisol reactivity and fear of rejection. Students who had made a cross-cultural friend felt less intergroup anxiety and made more intergroup friends (Page-Gould et al., 2008).

Another theory of social anxiety, appropriate to understanding immigrants' experience, is the Anxiety and Uncertainty Management theory of communication. By this theory, individuals initially feel anxious and uncertain about interacting with members of other groups (Gudykunst, 2005). Specifically, individuals are concerned about what appropriate communication is, and worried about how the out-group will perceive them (Gudykunst, 2005). Moreover, an individual's anxiety about intergroup contact is mediated by their confidence in their communication abilities (Florack, Rohmann, Palcu, & Mazziotta, 2014). Consequently, this anxiety and uncertainty also decreases as contact increases with out-group members (Gudykunst, 2005). Newly immigrated students are more likely to make friends if they have had previous cross-cultural friendships, have self confidence in language acquisition and communication, and are able to manage general anxiety (Florack, et al., 2014).

Since immigrant students benefit from cross-cultural friendships when adapting to a new culture, it can be problematic when they only make friends within their own cultural groups (Verbera, 2015). This may be due to immigrant students preferring same-cultural friendships when they have fewer friends, or to intergroup anxiety (Florack et al., 2014; Page-Gould et al., 2008; Verbera, 2015). It can also be more difficult for immigrants to make cross-cultural friends when they are a first-generation immigrant, have a high level of cultural pride, and when there is a high level of cultural diversity in the classroom (Stefanek, Strohmeier, & Dagmar, 2015). This can be due to a preference to make friends within their own culture, and because students have the opportunity to do so despite students of other cultures in their class.

Beyond decreased anxiety and stress, students higher in *social confidence* are more likely to pursue social interactions with others (Fleming & Courtney, 1984). Tymes, Outlaw, and Hamilton (2016) define social confidence as an aggregate of “decision-making capabilities, communication, effective relationships, and assertiveness” and that “social confidence implies perceived capabilities to execute a course of action in social interactions” (pp. 12-13). For Tymes et al., social confidence measured an increased ease in responding positively to both conflict and non-conflict social situations, such as bullying or being asked to join groups of other students.

Elsewhere, Damer, Latimer, and Porter (2010) described social confidence as being the opposite of social anxiety. Miller and Coll (2007) contrasted social confidence with social withdrawal or shyness, citing parallels to social competence, which Semrud-Clikeman (2007) described as an individual’s ability to communicate, get along with others, and successfully adapt to social situations. For Miller and Coll, social confidence is affected mainly by physiological and social factors, though a main social factor affecting social confidence is friendships. They further noted a dynamic relationship between friendships and social confidence. While friends help individuals to gain social confidence, some form of social knowledge is also required to make friends to begin with.

Drawing from the three above definitions given above, for the purpose of this study social confidence is defined as an individual’s ability to respond to social situations in an adaptive, positive, and involved manner. Thus, socially confident individuals should be able to react to a variety of situations with ease, possess positive social skills such as being able to communicate effectively, while also engaging with social situations rather than being withdrawn.

It is clear that new immigrant students are confronted with varied challenges in making friends. These challenges could be detrimental, not only because students may forego the general benefits of friendship, such as increased psychological well-being, but also because they may lack the support of such friendships in times of great change (Erdley et al., 2001; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2006; Oppedal & Roysamb, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Virta et al., 2004; Werner & Smith, 2001). Cross cultural friendships can assist immigrant students in learning new languages and cultural systems (Verbera, 2015), helping them gain social confidence and make friends. Otherwise, they may face further challenges to their success in multiple areas, including academic success, careers, social involvement, psychological health, and overall well-being. Although the above research suggests creating friendships is important for the wellbeing of new immigrant students, there is little research that identifies the challenges that these students face in making friends from their own perspective. According to Hébert, Sun, and Kowch (2004), it is important for future research to identify strategies by which immigrant adolescents can develop friendships, and thus derive benefit from the positive outcomes associated with them. Further, there is little research on social confidence, and a dearth of findings on how social confidence affects immigrants, or what it means to them.

The research described next will examine how immigrant students gain social confidence and make friends in secondary school. Not only does this study focus on the *immigrant experience*—specifically, on *friendship* and *social confidence*—it examines these concepts to highlight interrelationships between them. Though previous research examined cross-cultural friendships and social experiences of immigrants from the perspective of the host culture, this study is unique because it draws directly from the perspectives of immigrant students.

## **Method**

### **Approach**

In order to answer the research question “How do immigrant students gain social confidence in secondary school?” thematic analysis was chosen as the analytical framework for interpreting the data collected in this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis (TA) was chosen because it allows the researcher to interpretively identify themes that may not have been considered closely in the previous research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, TA was selected for the current study due to its inductive approach – themes are generated from across the whole data set and evidence for the meaning and depth of each theme is presented in the analysis. Unique to inductive approaches, the data collected and the themes that are identified shape the research, rather than the other way around. This unique trait of inductive analysis is useful for instances when there is a lack of previous research in the topic area, such as in the present case of immigrant students making friends and gaining social confidence. It is also useful to ensure that the themes that are identified are equally analyzed, rather than focusing on or searching for themes to fit into a pre-existing framework.

Braun and Clarke (2006) advise that themes should be identified due to their prevalence and/or importance to answering research questions. Themes will be discerned by answering the present study’s research question (“How do immigrant students gain social confidence?”) from interview data encompassing participants’ common words, semantic meanings, and metaphorical speech. An assumption in TA is that there is a shared, informal definition of most words used between people (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order to use the semantic meanings of words in order to create themes, this assumption must be followed despite being limiting because each individual may differently use what seem like common words. In other words, TA uses the generally accepted semantic meanings of words in order to generate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Participants**

Following ethics clearance from the Conjoint Facilities Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary, 17 consenting participants were recruited through use of the Research Participation System at the University of Calgary, and were compensated one bonus percentage for a psychology course in which they were currently enrolled. Participants included 14 females and 3 males, who all moved to Canada between grades five to nine (ages 9-15). More information about these participants, including their country of origin and ages when they immigrated can be found in Appendix A. Participants in this study met two eligibility requirements: they must have moved to Canada between grades five and nine, and must not have known English prior to immigrating here.

The grade group chosen for this study was significant because as discussed previously, friendships, and relatedly social confidence, acquire increasing importance over middle childhood, preadolescence, and adolescence (Berndt, 2004; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Miller & Coll, 2007). Previous research shows that new immigrants who face language barriers tend to make same-cultural friendships and lack cross-cultural friendships (Verbera, 2015).

### **Procedure**

Participants chose to participate through two data collection procedures: in either a focus group or in a one-on-one interview. Eleven participants participated in three separate focus groups, while six participants opted for a one-on-one interview. The focus groups



consisted of three, four, and four participants respectfully. Before the focus groups or interviews began, participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study, what would be asked of them, and that they would be audio recorded. At that time, participants were either able to sign an informed consent form and chose a pseudonym or to opt-out of the study. If participants chose to opt-out they were not penalized and would still receive their bonus credit. No participants chose to opt-out. However, there were participants whose data has been discarded because they did not meet the eligibility requirements, but were a part of a focus group and were kept in the group to uphold dignity of persons. Data from five other participants (not from the 17 included participants mentioned earlier) was discarded due to having sufficient data. These participants were chosen randomly. Both the focus groups and the one-on-one interviews followed a semi-structured interview format, with the same questions being asked in both situations (see Focus Group and Interview Questions, Appendix B). Outside the pre-determined questions, participants were prompted for more information when needed. Participants' responses were audio recorded, and later transcribed verbatim by the researcher. During the consent, participants were asked to provide a pseudonym for use in the later transcription and data analysis processes.

### **Data Analysis**

The entirety of the transcribed data consisted of 22,088 words and 79 pages. During the transcription process, the researcher re-read and repeatedly listened to the audio recordings, as well as made preliminary memos. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) and Riessman (1993), such listening and memos are important aspects of the transcription process, needed to become immersed in the data. Next, the transcribed data was colour coded to identify patterns in the meanings discernible in what participants said in the interviews. In this step, the whole data set was given equal consideration for the generation of a theme. Third, the colour coded data was examined and similar data were combined in order to form larger, universal themes. The themes were then assessed for quality (Braun & Clarke, 2006); namely, if the themes did not have enough support in the data, or if the theme did not relate to answering the research question, the theme was dropped or modified. Sub themes were also created in order to capture the depth of the data. After the themes were identified, they were labelled and defined. An example of identifying and labelling a theme is provided in the results section below, with a flow chart summarizing the analysis method provided in Appendix C.

### **Findings**

From the colour coded common ideas, themes were broken down into subthemes where necessary. Seven themes and numerous subthemes were generated (see Appendix D, Figure 1). While there were themes and subthemes that occurred more often in the data than others, there was no main theme that accurately described the overall student immigrant experience in regards to making friends and gaining social confidence. Rather, the quantity and quality of the identified themes and subthemes together highlight a diverse and detailed picture of the range of participant experiences. Creating themes was not based solely on word frequency; rather, it was based on grouping similar ideas together in a meaningful way intended to answer the question "how do immigrant students gain social confidence in secondary school?" in ways advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006), Kitzinger and Willmott (2002), Fielden, Sillence, and Little (2011), and Delaney, Egan, and O'Connell (2011).

After coding, there were a number of quotes considered from the transcribed data to create and refine each theme and subtheme. For example, the 'social support' theme, included, but was not limited to, the consideration of the following quotes:

*“My main focus and place of comfort and friendship was my family back then.” – Kathryn (pseudonym)*

*“It was pretty hard for most people but if you knew that one person (i.e., having one good friend) it makes it a lot easier.” - Mark (pseudonym)*

*“The thing that helped me was that in ESL classes you met people from all over the place and they are at the same level as you, so it didn't feel scary anymore.” – E.L. (pseudonym)*

The above quotes show participants speaking about social support which here is defined as “forms of assistance and encouragement that were offered by a student’s family, friends, and teachers.” The first quote refers to family being one individual’s main form of emotional support. On the other hand, the second quote talks about how participants found the presence of friends helpful. Lastly, the fourth quote discusses an inadvertent function of ESL classes – social support.

When taken together, these three quotes convey a number of ideas. First, they all speak to social support. Second, they specify that this support can come from a variety of sources—parents, friends, or school. Finally, they talk about how having this support “made it a lot easier” This last point shows that social support plays a role in the growth of social confidence. In summary, social support can come from many different sources, and can increase social confidence.

This particular theme of social support includes three subthemes. Subthemes were created based on the need to distinguish between similar, yet unique concepts in the data. Family, friends, and teachers all provide social support, but each does so in their own specific ways.

The same process was used to create each theme and the resulting subthemes which are discussed below (see Appendix D for a schematic). The implications of social confidence in participants’ lives are examined in the discussion section.

## **Social Support**

Social support refers to forms of assistance and encouragement that were offered by a student’s family, friends, and teachers. Family support works to increase the adjustment of the student to their new life in Canada. Many participants indicated that they relied heavily on their parents to provide emotional, language, and financial support during their transition in Canada.

The second subtheme of social support is friend support. Participants specified that the vast majority of their friendships when they first came to Canada were initiated by someone else, that these initial friendships were important in learning English and learning about different culture aspects such as TV shows or trends, and that over time as these friendships increased in number and quality they increased social confidence. One participant felt that friendships really helped him learn about Canada:

*“Your main goal is to learn the language and the culture when you first come here, and I feel like making friends really helps with that. You learn a lot faster when you are surrounded by that.” –Mark (pseudonym)*

The last subtheme of social support is teacher support. Teachers mainly provided academic and ESL support, which in turn boosted social confidence and the ability for participants to make friends. Several participants also stated that teachers encouraged students

to make friends through group projects. ESL programs were helpful for some students to learn English and make friends, whereas others felt that segregation from the rest of their class had a damaging effect on their ability to make friends and their social integration.

### **Commonality with Others**

Individuals connected with and found support from peers with whom they had something in common. However, some participants looked for a common culture while others looked for common interests. While participants stated that both were helpful in their own respects, the majority of participants felt that friends with similar interests resulted in more meaningful friendships than friends with a common culture. Many participants felt that they gravitated towards people of the same culture because they provided a form of social safety. In other words, they were people who participants could spend time with and speak to, however, most friends within the same culture did not turn into close friendships. Nonetheless, these friends were helpful in easing the transition to Canada by decreasing culture shock and helped participants understand certain cultural aspects in Canada. As one participant said:

*“You find people from the same culture so you are in the same group, but in a different place. They help you get used to the way of living.” – Karen (pseudonym)*

### **Embracing your Prior Self**

This theme included immigrant students embracing their prior culture and activities, as well as cultural appreciation of the student’s native culture from others. There were quite a few participants that found that embracing their native culture provided a sense of belonging and acceptance from both themselves and others. A few participants noted that at first they tried to hide their prior culture, but once they were able to embrace this culture and integrate it into their new lives in Canada they felt much more balanced, comfortable with themselves, and able to be proud of who they were. Also, when other people appreciated a participant’s prior culture and traditions, it also made them feel accepted and proud. Finally, many participants indicated that the loss of activities they previously were good at doing, because of the move to Canada, was detrimental to their confidence, whereas being able to continue to those prior activities increased their confidence in Canada. For example, one participant found that he made more friends by sharing his native culture rather than trying to hide it:

*“You have to find the people that are interested in your culture and share that with them. Canada is made of multiculturalism so embrace it rather than hide it. I feel like a lot of people do that too, when they first come to Canada they feel like they should hide their culture or language but actually sharing that might be a better idea because people are interested in different things.” – John (pseudonym)*

### **Accepting your “New” Self**

Most participants had to learn how to not be shy, to not be afraid of embarrassment, and to accept their limitations when they came to Canada. Mainly, they indicated that they withdrew from others because of their initially poor speaking skills, but also due to a fear of doing something wrong or done in ways viewed as “weird” in Canadian culture. This fear undermined participants’ social confidence, although realizing that it was ok if they spoke in

broken English and that others would still accept them significantly increased their social confidence.

*“I was so shy and I didn't want to reach out and talk to people because I wasn't confident in my speaking skills.” – Amy (pseudonym)*

### **Social Acceptability**

Related to the above theme, participants were concerned about doing things in a socially accepted way. As one participant stated:

*“I think socially what was more difficult was, there are things that are like trends or that are socially cool or not cool that you aren't aware of when you first come here, and for the first few months it's like ‘Oh, I've been wearing this all along and people think it's hideou’ or doing things a certain way and that's not the way that's socially acceptable to do it”. – Murphy (pseudonym)*

As well, not being able to participate in socially expected activities such as sleepovers or going to the mall hindered participant's social acceptability in making friends. Such inabilities were often due to strict parents.

### **Involvement in the Community**

Another substantial theme for participants was involvement in the community. This involvement included integration into social activities, such as volunteering, and assimilation into Canadian culture. Most participants found that once they began being involved in community activities they felt as if they belonged, they made new friends, and their social confidence increased. Also, some participants talked about how assimilating into Canadian culture, such as by not wearing cultural clothing, helped them make more friends and feel more confident. As one participant said:

*“I think what helped was getting more involved in the community. I started volunteering, participating in clubs, and practicing leadership skills, that helped me build my confidence.” – Mehenaz (pseudonym)*

### **Language Competence**

The final theme was about language competence. However, this theme was only significant to participants up until they learned adequate communication skills in English, while the earlier mentioned themes remained central to participants for years later, with many discussing how those themes remained relevant through high school and even at university. When new to Canada, most participants spoke about how they felt embarrassed about their speaking ability. Learning English did directly and significantly increase social confidence and the number and quality of friendships made.

*“Having that progression of your language and communication, with that came more social confidence and with more social confidence you make more friends...As I am more fluent in English I am making more friends that are not just within my culture.” – Mary (pseudonym)*

It is important to note that there were some differences between focus group and individual interviews. While the questions were the same for participants in both interview formats, there was more discussion in the focus groups which generated more data. As well, these discussions brought up ideas that participants in the individual interviews often had not thought of. Finally, the focus groups provided an opportunity for participants to compare and contrast their experiences and those of other immigrants, which yielded data that naturally showed differences or similarities between participants. On the other hand, individual interviews provided an opportunity for more in depth information through researcher prompting, with participants only relying on their own experiences, without being influenced by the experiences or the presence of other participants (i.e., in the focus groups).

## Discussion

This study outlined some of the major social difficulties that immigrant students go through, and how they adapt in a way that is conducive to their social confidence. The purpose of this study was to answer the question: "How do immigrant students gain social confidence in secondary school?"

After defining social confidence according to the participants, seven major themes were also identified. According to the participants in this study, social confidence means "*to have enough confidence and acceptance of both yourself and others to be able to feel comfortable and to express yourself in social settings without the fear of being judged.*"

The most important themes identified by participants in this study were social support, commonality with others, accepting your new self, and English competency. These themes were either discussed most frequently or were the most robust themes based on the different ways that participants talked about concepts that shared a common meaning. The other themes included embracing your prior self, social acceptability, and involvement in the community.

Beyond the seven identified themes answering this study's research question, participants also identified benefits they associated with social confidence. The first benefit of social confidence for immigrant students related to the frequency and quality of friendships and social support. Secondly, students who reported social confidence more often reported that they did well academically. For example, they spoke of being more likely to ask for help from teachers than other students who were more intimidated. Social support from peers reportedly helped them learn English, understand new concepts, and facilitated transitions to a new school system. Finally, most participants spoke about how they were shy when they first moved to Canada, with some clarifying that this shyness was due to a lack of social confidence and fears of being embarrassed because of inadequate English and cultural knowledge.

Beyond these participant-identified benefits, prior research shows numerous benefits of friendship for immigrant students. Verbera (2015) found that immigrant students benefited from cross-cultural friendships through help with school and with the language barrier. The present study had similar results in respect to cross-cultural friendships, but also found that same-culture friends were helpful in areas such as lessening culture shock, by offering encouragement and advice, and by providing a social safety net from which the new students could grow from. Taken together, these studies show that both cross-cultural and same cultural friendships are important in their own way.

The second key aspect to this study was social confidence. Tymes, Outlaw, and Hamilton (2016) found that social confidence was an important aspect of relationships between elementary school students. The current study also extends this finding by examining the importance of social confidence to new immigrant students in a secondary school setting. According to Tymes et al., social confidence was important for enabling students to appropriately respond to different social situations. Conversely, the present study found that

for immigrant students, social confidence was more central in being able to talk to others without being afraid of embarrassment or judgement.

From these themes and benefits of social confidence, recommendations can be made for teachers and counsellors. Academically, it is important for teachers to encourage new students to ask for help when they do not understand something. However, teachers and counsellors also play a key role in facilitating friendships. By encouraging and creating opportunities for immigrant students to talk to others, teachers and counsellors can increase a student's level of comfort and confidence. Group projects, free time, and pairing students up were all noted by participants as things teachers did to help them make friends. Similarly, it is important to integrate immigrant students into class activities. Encouraging students to talk to others, or to ask or answer questions, also helped new immigrants develop social confidence in their English abilities. Schools' cultural days also made participants feel included and worthy. Further, immigrant students would benefit from being involved in student clubs based on common interests and/or paired with a student ambassador, either based on common interests or a common culture or experience. Finally, it is essential to assess if immigrant students will benefit from placement in ESL or not. Similar to the findings in this study, Callahan, Wilkinson, and Muller (2010) found that only some students benefited from ESL while others did not. At the very least, it is important to ask immigrant students if they want to be in ESL, if they find it helpful, and to continue to ask if the student would like to stay in ESL or not.

From these recommendations, future research should inform better identification of students who could benefit from ESL. As well, social confidence should continue to be researched to investigate any differences in the meaning and themes of social confidence between groups. For example, both younger and older immigrant students could be compared, or immigrant students compared to host students.

Limitations of this study include the qualitative use of thematic analysis (TA), treating the semantic data analyzed as reflecting precisely equivalent meaning, and reliance on a self-selecting sample. The use of TA is challenging in that the meanings of words may slightly vary for each participant and for the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). If the analysis was completed by a different researcher using TA, the themes may vary slightly. However, the use of TA still provides a meaningful and deep understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both the focus group data and the individual data was considered equivalent in the analysis, when in reality distinct differences are attributable to each method of data collection. As well, participants self-selected from a group of University students, which suggests existing levels of social confidence and adaptiveness that is possibly inconsistent with a more general sample of immigrant students reflecting on their secondary school experience. Finally, the gender composition of participants (14 female, 3 male) may not make these findings wholly generalizable, especially to the male population of immigrant students.

Despite these limitations, this study is useful in that it included both focus groups and individual interviews, the sample size was good compared to other TA studies (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2006). Study participants were able to retrospectively comment on their experiences of secondary school while still being relatively new to Canada. Finally, beyond the assistance of a research supervisor, Author 2 (a PhD student) who had been an immigrant herself, participated in the research supervision, commenting that many aspects of the results of this study resonated with her experiences personally.

This study examined how immigrant students acquired and benefited from social confidence in secondary school. From retrospective interviews TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify seven major themes were as ways immigrant secondary school students acquired social confidence. Participants felt that having even one friend and a good level of language comprehension were most facilitative of social confidence. They also noted an

interdependent relationship between friendship and social confidence – it proves nearly impossible to have one without the other. Or, in the words of one of the study’s participants:

“Looking back I would say social confidence is a huge part, but back then I probably wouldn't of thought so, I would have just thought I was a shy kid who couldn't make friends.” – Ann

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## Appendixes

### Appendix A: Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym (F = female, M = male)	What grade did you enter in Canada?	What age did you move to Canada?	Where did you move from?	What is your native language?	Is English your 2 <sup>nd</sup> language, 3 <sup>rd</sup> , etc?
Focus Group 1					
Mary (F)	9	15	China	Mandarin	2nd
Kathryn (F)	6	11	Philippines	Tagalog	2nd
Murphy (F)	6	12	Chile & Mexico	Spanish	2nd
Focus Group 2					
Ann (F)	7	13	Hong Kong	Cantonese	2nd
Hayat (F)	8	13	Yemen	Arabic	2nd
Halo (M)	5	9	Mongolia	Mongolian	2nd
Mehenaz (F)	5	12	Bangladesh	Bengali	3rd
Focus Group 3					
Lulu (F)	5	11	Kenya	French	2nd
E.L. (F)	6	11	Albania	Albanian	2nd
Maria (F)	5	10	Pakistan	Urdu	2nd
Karen (F)	7	12	Pakistan	Urdu	2nd
Individual Interviews					
Anne (F)	5	11	China	Mandarin	2nd
Hana (F)	5	10	South Korea	Korean	2nd
John (M)	5	11	China	Mandarin	2nd
Mark (M)	5	10	Russia	Russian	2nd
Nina (F)	8	13	India	Gujarati	4th
Amy (F)	8	12	Korea	Korean	2nd

### Appendix B: Focus Group and Interview Questions

Demographic Questions:

At what age did you immigrate?

What year of school did you immigrate during?

Where did you immigrate from?

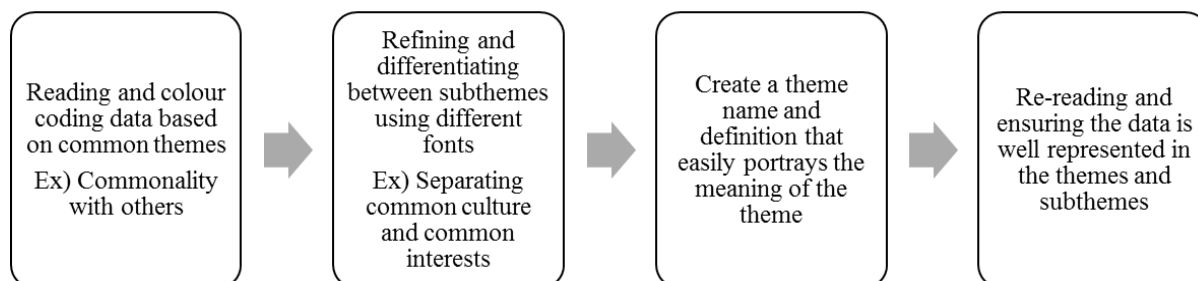
What is your native language?

Is English your 2nd, 3rd, or 4th, etc. language?

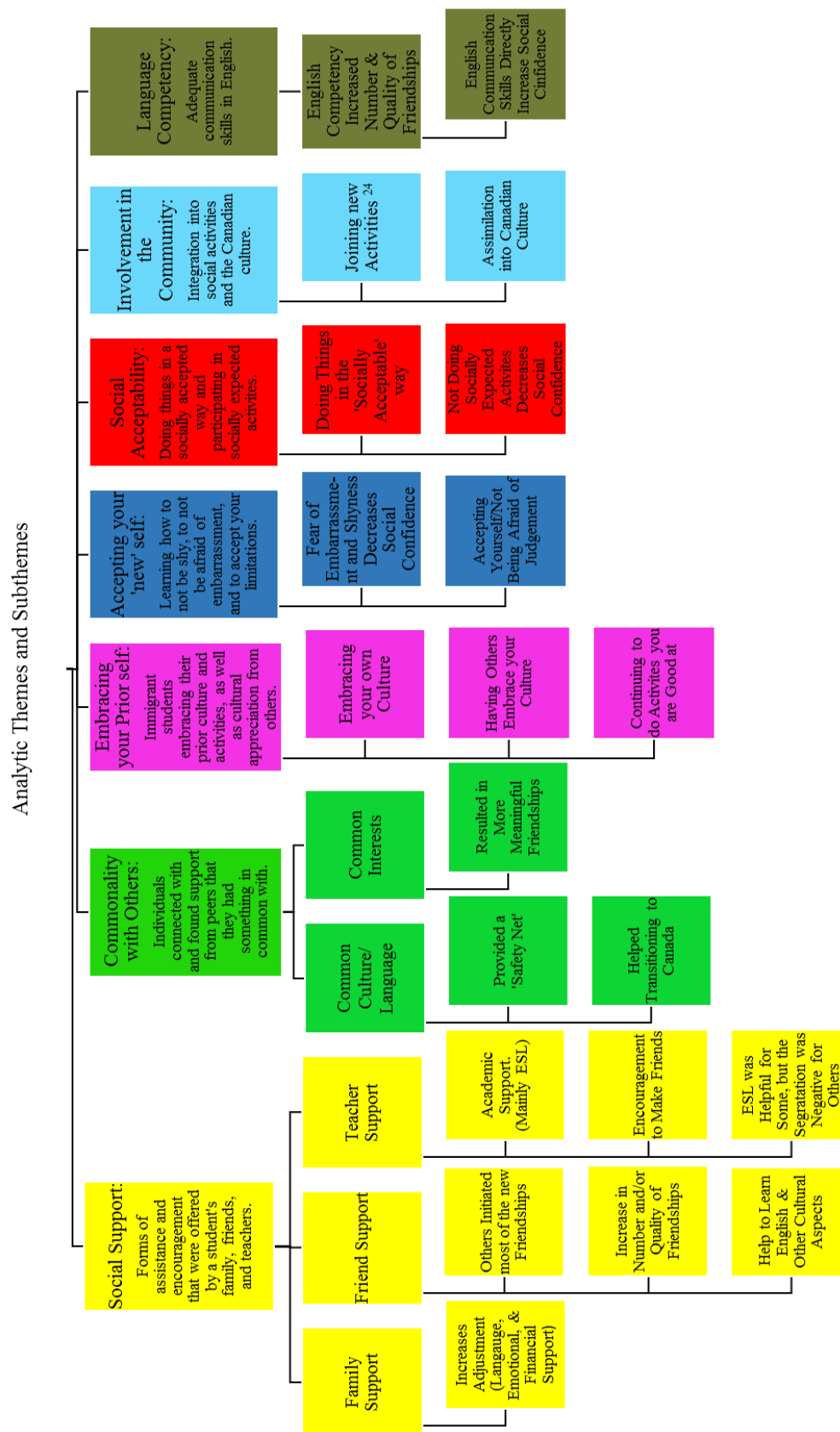
Interview Questions

- 1) What was it like for you to make friends? (i.e., was it easy or hard)
- 2) What kind of friendships did you have, and what did they mean to you? (i.e., close friendships or classmates)
- 3) Who did you make friends with? (i.e., same/different gender, same/different culture)
- 4) Tell me more about your close friendships. What made them close?
- 5) Tell me more about friends that weren't close but still a part of your network. What made them different from close friends?
- 6) Is there anything that other people did to help you make friends? (i.e., resources, teachers, parents)
- 7) How did you go about making friends? (What have you found helpful in making friends, who has been helpful to you and how?)
  - What were the kinds of things that you actively did to make friends?
  - What things did you let happen (i.e., that others did) to make and keep friends?
- 8) What worked best for you in making friends? Include examples.
- 9) What challenges did you face in making friends?
- 10) How did you overcome these challenges?
- 11) Tell me what social confidence means to you. Can you give me an example of a time where you showed social confidence that helped you with making friends?
- 12) What helped you gain social confidence?
- 13) What role did language (i.e., your use of English) play in gaining or having social confidence?
- 14) How did social confidence help you to initiate friendships and maintain friendships?
- 15) Was social confidence specifically helpful or important to you in grades 7-9 socially? How?
- 16) How has social confidence helped you with interacting with teachers?
- 17) How does social confidence help you in making and keeping friends today?
- 18) Were friendships important to you during your transition to Canada?
- 19) What advice would you give to a new immigrant in regards to friendships and social confidence?

### Appendix C: Flow Chart of the Data Analysis Process



Appendix D: Schematic of Themes and Subthemes



### Author Note

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