A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS' KNOWLEDGE OF AND EXPERIENCES WITH SUPPORTING NEWCOMER STUDENTS IN NOVA SCOTIA SCHOOLS

by

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Abstract

Nova Scotia schools are experiencing increased newcomer student enrolment, resulting in greater cultural and linguistic diversity. These students sometimes face complex academic, language, and mental health challenges that require specialized support. School psychologists are well-positioned to play an important role in addressing these needs, yet little is known about their preparedness to support this population. This study used qualitative description to examine how school psychologists in Nova Scotia understand and describe their knowledge and experiences working with newcomer students, particularly English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners. Nine psychologists participated in semi-structured interviews, and data were analyzed to identify common experiences and challenges. Participants expressed a strong commitment to ethical and inclusive practice but reported limited training, language barriers, and systemic constraints. Findings highlight the need for targeted professional development, culturally appropriate tools, and interdisciplinary collaboration. This study discusses implications for school psychologists and possibilities for future research.

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CHAPTER ONE

Literature Review

Canada has seen a significant increase in newcomers in recent years (Government of Canada, 2023). Schools are primary points of contact for many newcomer families and therefore play an important role in promoting academic achievement, mental health, and cultural integration (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019; Stewart, 2014). This presents both opportunities and challenges for school psychologists, who must support newcomer students across academic, behavioural, and social-emotional domains while navigating linguistic, cultural, and systemic complexities.

Newcomers in Canada and Nova Scotia

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) defines the term "newcomers" as individuals who have recently arrived in Canada and are in the process of settling and integrating in the country (Government of Canada, 2021). This category includes permanent residents, refugees, protected persons, asylum seekers, and temporary residents such as international students or children of foreign workers. The term newcomer is intentionally left open-ended to account for the variability in how long it takes individuals to feel settled, though research often uses a benchmark of up to five years since arrival (Government of Canada, 2021; 2024; Kalchos et al., 2022).

Given this definition, it is important to consider the current demographic context in which newcomers are arriving. In 2022, Canada welcomed over 431 000 newcomers, with 22% being under the age of 19 (Government of Canada, 2023). This reflects a growing proportion of school-aged children, many of whom are enrolling in Canadian schools. Whereas provinces like Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta continue to have the largest share of immigrants, Nova

Scotia has experienced a steady rise in immigration over the past decade, driven in part by its aging population, labour market needs, and rural depopulation (Government of Canada, 2022). In response, the province has implemented initiatives such as the Atlantic Immigration Program to attract and retain newcomers (Government of Canada, 2022).

Although Nova Scotia has historically welcomed fewer immigrants than other provinces, recent years have seen significant growth. In the 2019–2020 academic year, over 6900 newcomer students were enrolled in Nova Scotia's public schools, accounting for approximately 5% of the total public school population of 123 000 students that year (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [EECD], 2021).These students are not concentrated solely in urban areas. Whereas most newcomers reside in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), recent patterns indicate growing settlement in rural towns and smaller communities across the province. For example, between July 2022 and July 2023, newcomer populations grew in Cape Breton, as well as Colchester and Kings counties, reflecting broader efforts to support regional economic development and population sustainability (Nova Scotia Department of Finance and Treasury Board, 2023).

By 2024, newcomer students comprised 11% of the Halifax Regional Centre for Education (HRCE)'s total student enrolment. These students represent different countries of origin, including India, China, the Philippines, Nigeria, and Syria (Government of Canada, 2022). Some students, particularly those with refugee backgrounds, may have experienced interruptions in formal education or had limited opportunities to develop proficient literacy in their first language due to displacement or circumstances in their countries of origin (Antony-Newman & Niyozov, 2023; Flores, 2022; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009), whereas others may arrive with well-established academic foundations and multilingual skills.

Despite these complexities, schools are expected to support newcomer students' academic success, language acquisition, and social-emotional well-being, meaning that professionals such as school psychologists are called to expand their role beyond traditional assessment practices and to provide culturally responsive and equity-oriented services (Canadian Psychological Association [CPA], 2017; King et al., 2022). Understanding who newcomer students are, and the contexts of their arrivals and education in Nova Scotia, is therefore an essential foundation for evaluating how school psychologists support them.

Academic Challenges, Strengths, and Trajectories of Newcomer Students

Newcomer students enter Canadian schools with highly diverse educational backgrounds, language profiles, and levels of preparedness. Some students arrive with strong academic foundations and multilingual competencies, other students, particularly refugees and asylum seekers, may have experienced prolonged educational disruption due to war, displacement or poverty (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016; Wilkinson, 2002; Wilkinson et al., 2013). As a result, the academic trajectories of newcomer students are influenced by pre-migration experiences, linguistic readiness, and the supports they receive upon arrival (Gagné et al., 2021).

Language Acquisition and Literacy Development

English language acquisition is one of the most significant academic challenges faced by newcomer students. Many arrive in Canada speaking one or more languages other than English or French, but lack proficiency in the language of instruction in their school setting (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019; Khan & Takkac, 2019). This linguistic difference affects students' ability to access curricular content, engage in classroom discussions, and demonstrate learning in traditional ways (Auslander, 2022). For students with limited literacy in their first language, developing literacy in English becomes even more complex.

There is variation in terminology used in the literature to describe students who are learning English in addition to their home language(s). Webster & Lu (2012) note that terms such as English Language Learner (ELL), English as a Second Language (ESL), and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) are often used interchangeably without clear definitions and can create confusion in educational planning and research as a result. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2007) recommends using ELL to distinguish the student from the program, whereas Gu & Kim (2025) argue that terminology influences both classroom practice and educational policy, and suggest more precise terms like multilingual learner to better reflect students' language backgrounds. Gunderson (2021) further cautions that labels such as ESL may overlook differences in prior schooling, language proficiency, and sociocultural contexts.

In Nova Scotia, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) uses the term English as an Additional Language (EAL)/ French as an Additional Language (FAL) to describe students whose primary language is not English or French and who require language development support (EECD, 2021). The Nova Scotia EAL/FAL strategy recognizes increased immigration, particularly in the Halifax Regional Municipality as well as rural communities, newcomers who are refugees or from war-affected origins, and newcomers with interrupted schooling as features of the linguistic and cultural diversity of EAL students (EECD, 2021).

Inadequate language support often results in academic disengagement or frustration. Oikonomidoy (2015) documented how students who were the only ones in a classroom unable to speak English often felt isolated and overwhelmed, unable to participate or make social connections. Similarly, Gagné et al. (2018) reported that racialized newcomer youth learning English may struggle with fears of being judged in social situations, uncertainty around using

appropriate vocabulary, and reduced confidence in their reading and writing abilities. Limited language support can also restrict engagement with the broader school community. In a Manitoba-based study, Arabic-speaking refugee parents reported that their limited English proficiency hindered their ability to communicate with educators, understand school expectations, and support their children's academic progress (Cranston et al., 2021). These language barriers were often compounded by additional settlement-related stressors, such as housing instability and employment insecurity, which also contributed to families' ability to participate in school life (Cranston et al., 2021). These findings suggest that language supports that extend beyond classroom instruction are often necessary.

Even when students demonstrate conversational fluency, they may still require structured language support to help them meet academic expectations. Cummins (1999) emphasized differences in the rate of acquisition between conversational language, or basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS), and academic language, or cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Conversational fluency in English is hypothesized to typically develop within one to two years of arrival, whereas academic language proficiency often requires at least five years or longer to catch up to native English speakers (Collier, 1987; Cummins, 1987, 1999; Hakuta et al., 2000). Without explicit and sustained support, students who appear fluent in day-to-day conversation may continue to struggle with subject-specific vocabulary, academic discourse, and complex syntax (Cummins et al., 2012).

Approaches to English language support vary across Canadian provinces, school boards, and even individual schools. In Ontario, for example, students may receive designated English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Literacy Development (ELD) programming based on their prior literacy experiences (Campbell, 2020; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). However, the

delivery of language instruction is inconsistent, and it is often embedded within mainstream academic programming and with differing levels of subject-specific support depending on the school, classroom, or region. In Nova Scotia, EAL instruction is provided through a tiered support model that begins in the classroom and may include targeted or intensive interventions depending on the student's needs, assessment data, and available school resources (EECD, 2021). These provincial variations in programming can influence newcomer students' access to language support. Additionally, learning a new language is not solely a cognitive task; for newcomer students, language proficiency can be viewed as one dimension of a broader social experience shaped by intersecting factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, and gender, all of which can also influence academic outcomes and access to opportunities (Jiménez-Castellanos & García, 2017; Sah & Zaidi, 2025).

Interrupted Schooling and Grade Placement

Refugee and asylum-seeking students may arrive in Canada with limited or interrupted education due to conflict, displacement, or prolonged periods outside of school. Wilkinson et al. (2013) examined high school trajectories of newcomer youth in Canada and found that those arriving as refugees without prior instruction in English or French showed slower academic progress than their peers compared to refugees with knowledge of English or French. Students placed directly into age-appropriate grades, despite gaps in schooling, often struggled to keep pace with curricular demands (Campbell, 2021; Gagné et al., 2021; Wilkinson, 2002; Wilkinson et al., 2013). Antony-Newman & Niyozov (2023) similarly identified grade placement mismatches, language barriers, and the absence of culturally responsive instruction as some of the main challenges affecting academic achievement and school belonging for refugee youth in

Canadian classrooms. Alternatively, placing students in grades far below their age level can result in social stigmatization and disengagement (Deckers & Zinga, 2012).

These educational mismatches can affect students' post-secondary aspirations. Youth who arrive in later grades often require high school upgrading or additional language support, which may delay or prevent their transition to postsecondary education (Wilkinson et al., 2013). In a longitudinal study of newcomer children in British Columbia, Gagné et al. (2021) found that early assessment of literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional development was predictive of later academic outcomes. Students with stronger early skills in these areas were more likely to show consistent academic progress over time. In contrast, students with lower initial scores, particularly in numeracy and social-emotional development, were more likely to experience a decline in academic achievement. These findings suggest that early identification of these skills may be important for guiding appropriate supports for newcomer students (Gagné et al., 2021). Nakhaie et al. (2022) further emphasized that academic persistence among newcomer students is influenced not only by prior schooling but also by how welcoming and supportive their school environments are, particularly in terms of teacher attitudes and school culture.

Academic Aspirations and Strengths

Newcomer students often exhibit strong academic aspirations and resilience, even when facing challenges. For example, Shakya et al. (2012) focused on newcomer refugee youth from Afghan, Karen, and Sudanese communities in Toronto and found that participants consistently expressed a desire to pursue higher education in Canada. These aspirations were influenced by both pre-migration experiences, such as educational interruptions and displacement, and post-migration factors, including shifts in family responsibilities and systemic barriers. Although the overall commitment to education was evident across participants, those who had experienced

more extensive or prolonged disruptions in their schooling appeared less certain about their ability to attend postsecondary education. This suggests that interruptions in education when combined with ongoing post-migration difficulties, may influence students' perceived attainability (Shakya et al., 2012). Despite the challenges, education was a central goal for many of the youth.

These findings are supported by government data showing that 75.5% of immigrant youth who arrived in Canada before the age of five enrolled in post-secondary education by age 20, compared to 60.2% of those who arrived between ages 10 and 14 (Government of Canada, 2017, 2019, 2025). Early arrival typically means entering school at the elementary level, which allows more time for the development of academic language proficiency, a process that is estimated to take between five and ten years (Collier, 1987; Cummins, 1999). Younger students also benefit from longer exposure to the school system, peer networks, and curriculum continuity, all of which support language acquisition and academic adaptation (Brown et al., 2020; Campbell, 2021; Government of Canada, 2025; Wilkinson, 2002). In contrast, students arriving during later grades often have less time to acquire the academic language needed to meet high school academic expectations. These patterns highlight the importance of timely, targeted support for newly arrived youth, especially those entering the system during high school years.

School-Based Supports for Academic Success

The academic success of newcomer students in Canada is significantly influenced by the school environment, including access to instructional support, teacher expectations, and peer relationships. It has been shown that schools implementing structured mentoring, culturally affirming pedagogy, and meaningful family engagement can increase academic resilience and

motivation among newcomer youth (Li & Que, 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). These supports help address the challenges many newcomers face, such as navigating unfamiliar school systems, managing language demands, and coping with social isolation. For example, peer mentorship programs and academic bridging initiatives have been found to help students better understand the curriculum, practice English, and build confidence in their abilities (Pryce et al., 2019). When such practices are intentionally embedded within school culture, they contribute to a more inclusive and supportive environment, one that is essential for promoting equitable academic outcomes for newcomer backgrounds.

Generalized approaches to academic support may not adequately address the diverse needs of different newcomer groups. For instance, students from refugee backgrounds may have experienced traumatic events related to war, forced migration, or family separation, which can influence emotional regulation, attention, and learning (Antony-Newman & Niyozov, 2023; Maynard et al., 2019). 'Trauma-informed' instructional practices focused on creating a safe school culture, building relationships, and supporting students' self-efficacy, are increasingly being used and promoted in educational and health contexts (Chafouleas et al., 2016; Kostouros et al., 2023; Maynard et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2019). However, despite the popularity of trauma-informed approaches, a recent review by Lembke et al., (2024) found that most school-based trauma-sensitive programs are not specifically designed for refugee students. They reviewed 41 school-based trauma-sensitive frameworks internationally, and reported that whereas 35% of studies explicitly include refugee-background students, only 17.6% of models offer refugee-specific adaptations (Lembke et al., 2024). With no conclusive evidence on academic outcomes, this suggests that current school-based 'trauma-informed' or 'trauma-

sensitive' models may not fully meet the learning needs of refugee students who experienced traumatic events (Lembke et al., 2024; Maynard et al., 2019).

In addition to challenges related to experiencing traumatic events, some newcomer students face academic adjustment difficulties rooted in systemic and pedagogical differences between their prior education systems and those in Canada. Students arriving from countries with formal schooling systems may be unfamiliar with Canadian classroom norms in terms of instructional style, classroom expectations or even equitable access to education (Antony-Newman & Niyozov, 2023; Molyneux et al., 2024; Palova et al., 2023). These students may benefit more from orientation to Canadian classroom norms and expectations rather than remedial instruction (Crooks et al., 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2013). As such, schools are encouraged to move beyond one-size-fits-all interventions and develop personalized, culturally responsive strategies to support students across the academic spectrum.

Cultural Adaptation, Social Integration, and Discrimination

Newcomer students are not only navigating a new language and school system but also managing cultural transitions upon arrival in Canada. One process involved in this adjustment is acculturation, which refers to the psychological and cultural changes that occur when individuals adapt to a new sociocultural environment (Berry, 2005). For newcomer students, this often involves balancing the expectations of Canadian schools while maintaining connection to their home culture. In educational contexts, this process is sometimes described as bicultural or intercultural adjustment, and it can be both enriching and stressful, depending on the degree of support offered by schools, families, and peers (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019; Li, 2010).

Acculturation and Educational Adjustment

The challenges associated with cultural adaptation are often referred to as acculturative stress, a form of psychological strain that has been widely observed among newcomer youth. It includes experiences of identity confusion, loneliness, marginalization, and intergenerational conflict (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). The extent and impact of acculturative stress depend on age of arrival, prior exposure to traumatic events or experiences, language fluency, and school support systems.

In schools, this process is often asymmetrical, with the responsibility of adapting to dominant cultural and classroom norms falling on newcomer students (Patel et al., 2016). For instance, newcomer teens may find Canadian classrooms more informal than what they were used to, requiring them to speak or interact with teachers in new ways. In one qualitative study, Chinese immigrant high schoolers in Alberta expressed that the contrast between the collaborative, discussion-based instruction style in Canada and the more structured and teacher-driven style of their homeland initially left them unsure how to behave (Li, 2010). Essentially, newcomer youth are often trying to navigate two cultures (i.e., maintaining their home culture at home while adapting to expectations of Canadian schools). This duality can contribute to social discomfort, particularly when students are concerned about accent differences or not knowing how to use informal speech like slang (Kalchos et al., 2022; Kayaalp, 2016; Li, 2010; Oikonomidoy, 2015). Norton & Toohey (2011) explain that these challenges are part of students' identity exploration where they work to establish a sense of self within both cultural contexts. These cultural and institutional differences can influence how newcomer students connect with peers and develop a sense of school belonging.

School Belonging and Peer Relationships

Peer relationships are another important component of social integration for newcomer students. However, forming friendships with Canadian-born peers can be challenging due to language barriers, cultural differences, and, at times, lack of mutual understanding from peers (Brown et al., 2020; Deckers & Zinga, 2012; Nakhaie et al., 2022; Selimos & Daniel, 2017). As a result, newcomer youth often initially form friendships with peers who share their language or experience, as these friendships can provide comfort and mutual understanding (Selimos & Daniel, 2017; Selimos & George, 2018). Whereas these peer networks can be valuable in easing the transition to a new school environment, they may also contribute to limited interaction with Canadian-born students, especially when schools do not intentionally promote cross-group connection (Selimos & Daniel, 2017).

Recent studies show how peer belonging and school climate can influence newcomer students' emotional well-being. For example, Thomson et al. (2024) found that although immigrant and refugee youth began with poorer emotional health in Grade 4, increases in peer belonging and a positive school climate were associated with higher life satisfaction, optimism, and self-esteem by Grade 7. Similarly, Gill et al. (2025) found that household and neighbourhood poverty predicted poorer health and life satisfaction among adolescents, with these effects partially mediated by lower levels of peer belonging and reduced adult support –especially among newcomer youth. These findings suggest that peer relationships and a supportive school environment can mitigate the effects of systemic disadvantage and contribute to more positive developmental outcomes for newcomer students.

Consistent with these more recent findings, some schools implemented strategies to support social integration, such as peer mentoring initiatives, after-school conversation clubs,

and culturally inclusive extracurricular activities (Pryce et al., 2019). These initiatives help reduce social barriers and provide intentional spaces for newcomer students to interact with local peers in supportive settings. Conversely, when schools do not actively promote social inclusion, newcomer students may experience social isolation, leading to disengagement from school, increased mental health concerns, and identity struggles (Smith et al., 2023). These challenges reinforce the need for school communities to move beyond surface-level diversity acknowledgement and to instead build meaningful relationships across cultural groups to ensure that diversity is valued (Selimos & Daniel, 2017; Selimos & George 2018; Smith et al., 2023).

Experiences of Racism, Discrimination, and Bias

Discrimination remains a significant barrier to newcomer students' social and academic integration. These challenges include experiences with ethnic discrimination at peer and school levels, anti-immigrant attitudes at the community level, and difficulties in maintaining positive ethnic identity in school environments that may not promote multiculturalism and tolerance (Brown & Chu, 2012). In American schools and communities, reports indicate a rising number of discriminatory experiences faced by ethnic minority youth, affecting their psychosocial wellbeing and school adjustment (Umaña-Taylor, 2016). In a meta-analysis, Benner et al. (2018) found that perceived racial and ethnic discrimination was consistently associated with negative psychosocial and academic outcomes. These included increased internalizing symptoms, lower self-esteem, and reduced academic engagement and performance (Benner et al., 2018). Newcomer youth may often face negative treatment such as discrimination, ridicule, and harassment from peers, teachers, and school administrators, leading to feeling unsafe in schools (Peguero & Bondy, 2011, 2020). In fact, the safety of newcomer youth is emerging as a particular concern among the challenges they encounter (Morales, 2021). Immigrant youth were

significantly more likely than their peers to experience bullying that went unreported or unnoticed by teachers and parents (Morales, 2021).These findings are relevant for understanding how discrimination may influence newcomer students' well-being and school adjustment in Canada.

In Canada, newcomers may be targeted for their accents, race or ethnicity, appearance (e.g. wearing a hijab or other religious or cultural attire) (Feng et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023; Vitoroulis & Georgiades, 2017). In a qualitative study by Smith et al., 2023, newcomer youth in Ontario reported that bullying and racist remarks from peers were common barriers to feeling safe and supported at school. They also felt that schools did not always provide sufficient orientation or support to help them integrate, leaving them vulnerable to exclusion (Smith et al., 2023). Discrimination at the systemic level was also highlighted in a review by Thomson et al. (2015) who found that that newcomer youth in Canada face social and institutional biases, including cultural, linguistic, and racial discrimination, all of which negatively affect their school experience. These beliefs can diminish students' self-confidence and limit the support or opportunities offered to them (Smith et al., 2023; Vitoroulis & Georgiades, 2017). Rossiter & Rossiter (2009) similarly observed that immigrant youth often felt sidelined at school due to cultural misunderstanding and a lack of inclusive practices. Cultural misunderstanding, combined with the absence of anti-racist policies and practices, creates environments where newcomer students may feel invisible or devalued.

Teacher attitudes, institutional practices, and school-wide policies significantly affect how newcomer students experience school culture. When teachers are equipped to use culturally responsive pedagogy and to intervene in bias or bullying, newcomer students report a greater sense of belonging (Brown et al., 2020; Cholewa et al., 2014). In Nova Scotia, culturally and

linguistically responsive pedagogy (CRP) is defined as teaching that connects a student's social, cultural, family, or language background to what the student is learning (EECD, 2021). Beyond the classroom, non-teaching professionals such as school psychologists and social workers can significantly contribute to supporting students who may face difficulties in engaging in the learning process due to cultural, emotional, or contextual factors (Clarke & Wan, 2011; Lopez & Bursztyn, 2013; Stewart, 2014). These professionals offer important psychosocial support to newcomer students, creating a safe and supportive environment that aims to enhance their educational trajectories (Norozi, 2023; Stewart, 2014). Research suggests that successful school adjustment for newcomer students depends on a supportive school environment that encourages diversity, inter-group relations, and supportive teachers (Nakhaie et al., 2022). Developing safe, inclusive schools requires a whole-school approach, including welcoming entry points for families, implementing multicultural curricula, anti-bullying policies, and staff who reflect diverse backgrounds (Hudspath-Niemi & Conroy, 2013; Nakhaie et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2023). Feeling a sense of belonging is strongly associated with academic engagement, emotional resilience, and mental well-being (Smith et al., 2023; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010).

Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-Being

Newcomer students, particularly those from refugee backgrounds, often face heightened mental health risks due to cumulative pre- and post-migration stressors. Although many of these students demonstrate resilience, their psychosocial needs are frequently complex and unaddressed, especially in educational settings. Schools, as primary sites of daily contact and socialization, play a critical role in identifying and addressing the mental health needs of these students (Antony-Newman & Niyozov, 2023; Canadian Psychological Association, 2023).

However, systemic, cultural, and linguistic barriers can limit students' access to adequate and appropriate support (Crooks et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 2015).

Pre-Migration and Post-Migration Stressors

Newcomer students may face a range of stressors throughout the migration journey, often described as occurring in three phases: pre-migration, migration, and post-migration (Kirmayer et al., 2011; Somo, 2024). Whereas the intensity and nature of these stressors vary by individual and migration context, they can significantly affect students' adjustment and well-being. Students from refugee or asylum-seeking backgrounds, in particular, often experience heightened risks due to forced displacement and exposure to traumatic events. However, even those who migrated voluntarily may encounter substantial emotional and psychological challenges during and after resettlement.

The pre-migration phase, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), refers to the period prior to leaving one's home country and may include exposure to armed conflict, violence, natural disasters, poverty, or persecution (WHO, 2023). Children and youth with refugee backgrounds are especially likely to report traumatic events such as family separation, persecution, or loss (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016; Somo, 2024). During the migration phase, students may face poor living conditions in temporary or informal settlements, limited access to basic needs like education, health care, or safe housing, and disruptions to routines and schooling (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016; WHO, 2023). These experiences can compound stress and reduce feelings of stability and safety.

Post-migration stressors arise after resettlement and may include housing insecurity, language barriers, financial strain, separation from support networks, insecure immigration status, or discrimination (Crooks et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2019). Additionally, host communities

are not always receptive to newcomers, and some students report experiences of exclusion, racism, or rejection (Beiser & Hou, 2017; Fazel, 2018). Smith et al. (2023) found that newcomer students commonly identified academic pressure, racism, and a lack of culturally relevant supports as significant sources of ongoing stress. These stressors may present as behavioural challenges, emotional withdrawal or declines in academic performance (Beloyianni & Touloumakos, 2025). Importantly, even immigrant youth without a history of forced migration may experience grief, identity confusion, or emotional distress due to separation from extended family, changes in socioeconomic status, or pressure to acculturate while preserving cultural heritage can create emotional strain (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019; Li, 2010). These findings highlight the need for schools to understand the varied experiences within the newcomer population and respond with individualized support.

Barriers to Mental Health Support

Despite growing evidence of mental health needs, newcomer youth consistently access mental health services less often than their Canadian-born peers (Ng & Zhang, 2021; Thomson et al., 2015). A number of barriers contribute to this gap, including practical obstacles such as language limitations, lack of familiarity with the Canadian mental health system, and insufficient availability of culturally appropriate services. Many families are unaware of how to access support or assume that help must be sought outside of school systems (Ahmed et al., 2016; Brar-Josan & Yohani, 2019).

Cultural stigma is also a significant barrier in limiting access to care. In some cultural contexts, mental illness is associated with shame, weakness or social ostracization, which may lead families to delay seeking support until symptoms become severe (Kirmayer et al., 2011; Thomson et al., 2015). Newcomer youth themselves may internalize these stigmas, which can

reduce their reluctance to disclose emotional distress or to engage in counselling. Additionally, some youth experience what has been described as "double stigma," in which they face both racial microaggressions and mental health stigma (Feng et al., 2023).

Schools are often positioned to identify and support students experiencing emotional distress, yet school-based mental health services may not always be accessible or culturally appropriate to newcomer students. Smith et al. (2023) found that some students in Ontario described school-based supports as difficult to access, unwelcoming or not specific to their experiences. Some students noted that school staff lacked the cultural sensitivity or training to understand their perspectives, whereas others expressed concern that seeking help would further stigmatize them in their peer groups. These findings highlight the need for schools to implement culturally responsive mental health supports which are delivered in students' first languages when possible and grounded in an understanding of migration-related stress.

School-Based Mental Health Interventions and School Climate

Whereas general mental health promotion and support are important in promoting school-wide well-being, some newcomer students require more targeted, structured interventions to address the effects of experiencing traumatic events, chronic stress, and social-emotional disruption (Fazel et al., 2012; Kirmayer et al., 2011. Given the high levels of need and the daily presence of students in school, educational settings are ideal for delivering preventative and responsive mental health services. School-based professionals such as psychologists, counsellors, and social workers can play an important role in identifying at-risk students, providing interventions, and consulting with teachers to support students with traumatic experiences in classrooms (Crooks et al., 2020).

One example of a school-based mental health service is the Supporting Transition Resilience of Newcomer Groups (STRONG) program, a manualized, school-based group intervention designed to specifically support the social-emotional wellbeing of immigrant and refugee youth. STRONG is facilitated by school mental health professions and focuses on teaching coping skills, building peer support, and promoting a positive sense of identity among participants (Crooks et al., 2020). The program incorporates culturally responsive practices and addresses common stressors encountered by newcomer students, including social isolation, academic pressure, and challenges related to identity development. Initial evaluation studies show that STRONG is both feasible and acceptable within Canadian school settings (Crooks et al., 2020).

Another example is the Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS), a school-based group intervention designed to reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety among students exposed to traumatic events (Allison & Ferreira, 2017; Jaycox et al., 2012). When culturally adapted, the program can be implemented by school psychologists and other trained mental health professionals, and has demonstrated efficacy across diverse student populations, including immigrant and refugee youth (Sullivan et al., 2016). However, barriers such as limited staffing, insufficient training for working with students with traumatic experiences, and a lack of linguistic resources (e.g., bilingual personal and access to interpretation) can limit implementation (Allison & Ferreira, 2017; Fazel, 2018). In many cases, school psychologists are among the few professionals positioned to deliver or advocate for such interventions, which depicts the need for greater systemic support and professional development in this area.

These individual and group-based interventions must also be supported by school conditions that promote student connection and well-being. As previously discussed, peer belonging and supportive relationships are crucial for promoting newcomer students' mental health, and these are strongly shaped by the overall school climate. Schools that affirm and value cultural diversity, address discrimination, and promote student-teacher relationships can ease the psychological strain of migration and promote a sense of belonging, which is a known protective factor against anxiety and depression (Bennouna et al., 2021; Crooks et al., 2020; Selimos & Daniel, 2017; Selimos & George, 2018; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010).

In contrast, when schools ignore cultural differences or fail to address racism, students may experience marginalization and emotional distress, potentially leading to disengagement from support services (Thomson et al., 2015). In these situations, school psychologists may play a critical role in bringing together individual support and systemic change. In addition to providing direct services, they can consult with educators, lead school-wide initiatives, and advocate for the psychosocial and cultural needs of diverse student populations. This aligns with the framework outlined by Cowan et al. (2013), which emphasizes the importance of a more comprehensive approach to school mental health, one that integrates individual intervention with broader efforts to create safe, inclusive, and supportive environments for all students. Understanding how school psychologists are prepared to take on these responsibilities requires further exploration into their roles and competencies within educational settings.

The Roles and Competencies of School Psychologists

School psychologists have specialized training in psychological assessment, intervention, consultation, and systems-level practices, skills which are essential for addressing the academic, social-emotional, and mental health needs of diverse student populations, including newcomers

(Jimerson et al., 2024). Despite this comprehensive training, there is uncertainty regarding the degree to which school psychologists are adequately prepared and supported to work efficiently with culturally and linguistically diverse students (Malone & Ishmail, 2020; Reyna et al., 2017).

Traditional and Expanding Roles in Canada

In the Canadian context, the role of school psychologists varies slightly across provinces but commonly focuses on psychoeducational assessment (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017). In Nova Scotia, this focus on assessment is influenced by systemic factors, including long waitlists, school board policies, and the necessity of formal diagnoses to access support services (Corkum et al., 2007). Yet, research has increasingly highlighted the need for school psychologists to engage in a broader scope of practice that includes intervention, consultation, prevention, and systems-level advocacy (Froese & Montgomery, 2014; King et al., 2022). School psychologists have reported a desire to engage more in all five core competency areas (i.e., assessment, consultation, intervention, ethics, and research) and many have also indicated a desire to allocate more time to mental health service delivery and less to psychoeducational testing (King et al., 2022). This preference could be particularly relevant for newcomer students, whose needs may require support beyond standardized assessment and require culturally responsive, preventative, and collaborative approaches.

Cultural Competence, Culturally Responsive Practice, and Cultural Humility

To meet the needs of diverse students, including newcomers, school psychologists must draw on culturally inclusive practices. Over the past two decades, there has been a growing emphasis on cultural competence within psychology. This shift is reflected in the professional recommendations for service delivery to racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse student populations (Rogers et al., 1999), followed by the development of cross-cultural school

psychology competences which helped to inform practice in multicultural settings (Rogers & Lopez, 2002). This movement has been further advanced by more recent literature and policy initiatives that outline specific competencies required for working with diverse student populations. For example, Robinson-Zañartu et al. (2019) emphasize that school psychologists must shift from deficit-based to asset-based orientation, where speaking more than one language is viewed as a cognitive, social, and academic strength. Most evidence-based interventions have also not been validated with multilingual populations, which requires school psychologists to critically evaluate the validity of interventions and assessment tools when used with multilingual students (Robinson-Zañartu et al., 2019). This trend in the literature aligns with the shift in professional standards and licensing requirements in Canada.

Professional guidelines emphasize the importance of cultural competence in the practice of school psychology. The Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) Code of Ethics (2017) includes the ethical responsibility to provide equitable and culturally appropriate services. Specifically, Principle I (Respect for the Dignity of Persons and Peoples) affirms the right of individuals to be treated with dignity regardless of their cultural background and Principle II (Responsible Caring) emphasizes the duty to offer services that are both competent and responsive to the needs of diverse populations. The CPA's Accreditation Standards for Doctoral and Residency Programs in Professional Psychology explicitly require accredited programs to prepare students to work competently with individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (CPA, 2023). Specifically, the CPA emphasizes the need for training the in the application of psychology with diverse populations, including knowledge of sociocultural factors that influence development, learning, and behaviour. The 2023 Accreditation Standards further expand on this by including expectations related to addressing systemic oppression and power

imbalances in training courses. Psychology students are expected to understand and respect the diversity of human experience, including race, ethnicity, language, Indigeneity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, and socioeconomic status, and to recognize how these intersect within systems (CPA, 2023).

Cultural competence in school psychology refers to the ability of school psychologists to effectively provide services to students and families from diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds (Rogers & Lopez, 2002). Cultural competence involves more than awareness of cultural differences, it requires the ability to work effectively across cultures through the adaptation of assessment practices, communication styles, and intervention approaches (Lopez & Bursztyn, 2013). The literature has since expanded and often uses the term culturally responsive instead, which involves awareness of one's own cultural worldview and biases, acquisition of knowledge about different cultural practices and worldviews, and the development of skills to adapt psychological services to meet the unique needs of diverse populations (Lopez & Bursztyn, 2013; Reyna et al., 2017). More recently, cultural humility has been introduced as a concept that builds on cultural competence (Lekas et al., 2020). Cultural humility acknowledges that psychologists will never be fully "competent" in every cultural context and must instead approach each client with openness, reflection, and a willingness to learn (Fisher, 2020). This perspective shifts the focus from acquiring static knowledge about cultures to engaging in a collaborative process grounded in respect and responsiveness. It also brings attention to the power imbalances often present in service delivery and focuses on client-centred approaches.

Despite the evolution of these frameworks, research indicates that school psychologists often feel only moderately prepared to apply culturally responsive practices into their daily work. For example, Reyna et al. (2017) found that psychologists reported greater confidence in their

general cultural awareness, than in their ability to implement appropriate strategies, particularly in situations involving language barriers or unfamiliar cultural norms. These limitations are not isolated to any one cultural group. In an American study examining school psychologists' work with Native American youth, Robinson-Zañartu et al. (2011) found disparities between cultural competencies that practitioners felt they had gained through training and those they had perceived as necessary for effective practice. School psychologists rated their training in all six key domains (i.e., legal and ethical issues, school culture and advocacy, psychoeducational assessment, interventions, work with interpreters, and research) significantly lower than what they believed was required for competent practice (Robinson-Zañartu et al., 2011). Such findings suggest that the challenge is systemic rather than confined to specific cultural groups.

Part of the challenge may lie in professional preparation. Whereas training programs have increasingly incorporated diversity-related coursework into their curricula, gaps remain in applied training and supervision opportunities (Chan et al., 2025; Hernandez et al., 2024; Jimerson et al., 2024; Malone & Ishmail, 2020; Wright et al., 2012). Canadian doctoral-level school psychology programs with Indigenous-specific training remain limited; for instance, none of the programs had publicly self-identified Indigenous tenure-track faculty, and only one offers training in assessment tools validated for use with Indigenous populations (Bernett et al., 2023). Similarly, Robinson-Zañartu et al. (2023) argue that even well-intentioned efforts to embed cultural content into training programs may fall short within Indigenous leadership, community, involvement, and intentional restructuring of curricula to reflect relational and land-based epistemologies. In general, Chan et al. (2025) argue that addressing these gaps requires an approach that moves beyond individual knowledge toward systemic equity. They emphasize that culturally responsive school psychology practice must be informed by an understanding of how

mental health, safety, and data-based decisions are influenced by larger structural inequities. This orientation repositions cultural competence as not only a professional obligation but a foundational element of socially just and inclusive practice in school psychology.

Assessment Practices with Newcomer Students

One area where culturally relevant practices are particularly critical is in the assessment of newcomer students. Assessing newcomer students, particularly those who are English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners, may present complex ethical and methodological challenges (Cadime & Mendes, 2024). Standardized psychological and educational tests are typically developed and normed on monolingual, English-speaking populations from Western cultural contexts, raising concerns about their validity and reliability when used with culturally and linguistically diverse students (Lopez & Bursztyn, 2013; Vega et al., 2016). As highlighted previously, factors such as unfamiliarity with Canadian classroom expectations, limited exposure to testing formats, and cultural or anxiety related to testing can influence performance outcomes, increasing the likelihood of misinterpretation. These challenges heighten the risk of inappropriate identification of learning or intellectual disabilities when test scores are interpreted without sufficient contextual understanding.

To address these concerns, professional guidelines recommend the use of alternative and ecologically valid assessment approaches. Both the CPA and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) emphasize the importance of integrating methods such as dynamic assessment, curriculum-based measurement, and structured behavioural observation when evaluating students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Dynamic assessment, in particular, evaluates a student's learning potential by incorporating mediated learning experiences, thereby reducing cultural and linguistic biases inherent in traditional assessments

(Poehner & Lantolf, 2005). When students have limited English proficiency, school psychologists are advised to collaborate with interpreters, cultural brokers, and English language learning (ELL/EAL) educators to gather contextual data and triangulate findings (Cadime & Mendes, 2024). However, despite these recommendations for best practice, implementation can be difficult in school contexts. In Nova Scotia, school psychologists are often responsible for multiple schools and face time constraints related to high assessment caseloads (King et al., 2022). These systemic constraints can compromise the integrity of the assessment process by restricting opportunities to apply culturally appropriate assessment methods or to consult with colleagues. As a result, some practitioners may feel compelled to proceed with tools that lack cultural validity (Vega et al., 2016).

Additionally, school psychologists' responsibilities with newcomer students may extend beyond assessment. School psychologists may be positioned to lead intervention and consultation for newcomer students. Effective intervention for newcomer students includes both direct services (e.g., counselling, social-emotional learning groups) and indirect support through consultation with educators, administrators, and families (Crooks et al., 2020; Heidelburg et al., 2025; Herati & Meyer, 2020). These efforts help ensure that supports are accessible and sustainable within the school context. Intervention programs such as STRONG and CBITS offer frameworks for delivering culturally informed, evidence-based mental health support to immigrant and refugee youth (Allison & Ferreira, 2017; Crooks et al., 2020; Jaycox et al., 2012). However, implementation of each of these programs requires training, scheduling flexibility, and system-level buy-in, all of which are resources that may be limited in schools. These practical barriers mirror those seen in assessment practices which reflects the overall systemic constraints on inclusive service delivery. As such, it becomes increasingly important to consider how school

psychologists can support newcomer students not only through individual assessment or intervention, but also through coordinated and collaborative service models.

The Multitiered Systems of Support (MTSS) Framework

The Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework provides a structured model for organizing school-based services that address the academic, behavioural, and mental health needs of all students, including those from newcomer backgrounds. MTSS is designed as a continuum of support with three tiers: Tier 1 offers universal strategies for all students, Tier 2 provides targeted interventions for students at risk, and Tier 3 involves intensive, individualized support (Loftus-Rattan et al., 2023; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). In Nova Scotia, the EAL and FAL Strategy Framework (EECD, 2021) outlines a tiered approach to language support that aligns with the MTSS model, which would organize programming into universal, targeted, and individualized supports. The framework emphasizes equitable access to learning and the important of collaborative planning among educators, EAL teachers, and other school professionals. School psychologists are integral to the successful implementation of MTSS, with their roles including conducting assessments, analyzing data, designing and coordinating interventions, and evaluating student outcomes (NASP, 2016). Their expertise ensures that interventions are evidence-based and targeted to the diverse needs of the student population (Eagle et al., 2015).

Although MTSS holds promise for promoting equity and early intervention, newcomer students may be marginalized in its implementation, as they may be underrepresented in data systems due to limitations in demographic tracking and language proficiency measures (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Loftus-Rattan et al., 2023). They may also be overrepresented in behaviour referrals when cultural differences or language barriers are misinterpreted as

behavioural issues (Bal & Perzigian, 2013; Cholewa et al., 2014). Without disaggregated data and culturally appropriate screening tools, schools may overlook early indicators of academic or emotional need and may inadvertently attribute student difficulties to individual deficits rather than broader systemic inequities (Cholewa et al., 2014; Gonzalez et al., 2022). School psychologists must therefore advocate for data equity, universal screening, and inclusive practices within the MTSS framework.

Ethical Practice, Policy Context, and Community Collaboration

School psychologists' work with newcomer students is situated within a broader ethical and policy landscape. In Canada, the CPA Code of Ethics for Psychologists provides guiding principles for ethical practice (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017). These principles intersect with provincial education policies and the roles of community organizations support newcomers. Cadime & Mendes (2024) emphasize that psychologists must not only be aware of cultural influences on development and behaviour but must also adapt their professional practices accordingly. This includes recognizing the risk of over pathologizing culturally unfamiliar behaviours or under-identifying needs masked by language barriers. Culturally responsive assessment, consultation, and intervention are therefore ethical imperatives for psychologists.

Nova Scotia's Inclusive Education Policy

Provincial policy further defines expectations for inclusive practice. Nova Scotia's Inclusive Education Policy sets an expectation for school employees to "support the well-being and achievement of every student" and "prevent systemic inequities and barriers within the classroom" (p. 5). Though the policy is not specific to newcomer students, it includes commitments that align closely with their needs, such as to use evidence-informed strategies that "provide culturally and linguistically responsive and engaging instruction and support for

students" (p. 5) and to affirm the cultural backgrounds of the student population and school community.

The policy landscape also includes the Nova Scotia Accessibility Act (2017), which identifies the removal of barriers in education, communication, and attitudes as essential to achieving an inclusive province. Under the Act, communication is recognized as a domain of accessibility, which includes consideration of language and cultural understanding as potential sources of barriers to equitable participation (Nova Scotia Legislature, 2017). This extends the concept of accessibility beyond physical or sensory impairments to include systemic factors that prevent access to information and services. School psychologists are expected to contribute to these policy goals through assessment, consultation, professional development, and collaborative planning. However, in practice, limited staffing, high caseloads, and a focus on psychometric testing often constrain their ability to engage in the broader mandate of inclusive education (see King et al., 2022). Nonetheless, psychologists are ethically and legally obligated to incorporate culturally responsive practices that address the needs of student well-being.

Interdisciplinary and Community Collaboration in Nova Scotia

Supporting newcomer students requires coordinated collaboration across school, family, and community contexts. Psychologists must work closely with EAL specialists, school counsellors, and administrators to develop integrated support plans for students. In Nova Scotia, collaborative teams such as Student Planning Teams (SPTs) and Teaching Support Teams (TSTs) offer school-based structures for multi-disciplinary problem-solving (EECD, 2021). However, some research shows that these types of teams are most effective when they include culturally responsive professionals and prioritize equity (Kalchos et al., 2022).

Community agencies also play a role in supporting the settlement, well-being, and academic integration of newcomer students and their families. For example, the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) provides wraparound services for newcomers, including youth-focused programming, parent support, and interpretation services (ISANS, 2024). The ISANS Youth and Family Centre offers culturally relevant mental health support, mentorship, and after-school programs that reinforce social-emotional development and integration (ISANS, 2024). The YMCA School Settlement Program and HRCE's Newcomer Welcome Centre are additional examples of community-school partnerships that help bring educational and settlement supports together. School psychologists can advocate for stronger connections between schools and these services, including referrals, co-facilitated programming, and shared professional development.

Advocacy and Systemic Change

Psychologists must act as advocates. The CPA has identified advocacy as a core component of school psychologists' roles, particularly in addressing systemic inequities accessing mental health care (CPA, 2017). In its position paper on the mental health needs of Canadian children and youth, the Educational and School Psychology section emphasizes that school psychologists can contribute to system-level change through consultation, collaboration, and participate in school- and district-wide planning (CPA, 2022). This includes advocating for policies and practices that support mental health promotion, early intervention, and culturally responsive service delivery (CPA, 2022). In addition to direct service delivery, school psychologists are encouraged to engage in public and professional advocacy by raising awareness of their role and the mental health needs of students among educators, families, and policymakers. Professional organizations are also tasked with promoting equitable access to

psychological services and supporting the profession through recruitment, training, and ongoing professional development. Together, these recommendations position advocacy as a fundamental responsibility in advancing equitable and effective mental health services in schools.

The CPA's Code of Ethics, along with the inclusive education mandate in Nova Scotia, legitimizes this role. Kalchos et al. (2022) argue that supporting newcomer students requires psychologists to move beyond technical competence to embrace socially just, anti-oppressive practices. This includes reflecting on their own positionality, recognizing institutional racism, and addressing barriers that disproportionately affect immigrant and refugee families (Chan et al., 2025; Jimerson et al., 2024). As Nova Scotia's schools become more culturally diverse, school psychologists must evolve as both service providers and change agents.

Conclusion

Newcomer students arrive with diverse strengths and needs that are shaped by their migration history, language background, and cultural identity. Schools are central to their adjustment, yet many face barriers such as language difficulties, limited access to mental health supports, and educational practices that are not always culturally responsive. School psychologists are positioned to support these students through assessment, intervention, and consultation. However, their effectiveness depends on adequate training, collaboration, and systemic support. Given these challenges, it is imperative to investigate the experiences and knowledge of school psychologists in Nova Scotia with respect to newcomer students and to identify any specific gaps in their self-reported competence.

CHAPTER TWO

A Qualitative Examination of School Psychologists' Knowledge of and Experiences with Supporting Newcomer Students in Nova Scotia Schools

Recently, Canada has experienced significant demographic shifts due to sustained immigration. For example, in 2022 alone, over 431,000 newcomers arrived in Canada, with approximately 22% being under the age of 19 (Government of Canada, 2023). Although immigration has typically been concentrated in provinces like Ontario and British Columbia, Nova Scotia has also seen a notable rise in newcomer populations (Government of Canada, 2022; 2023). This increase is reflected in public school enrollment. In the 2019-2020 school year more than 6900 newcomer students were enrolled in Nova Scotia's public schools, comprising a portion of the approximately 123 000 students enrolled that year (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [EECD], 2021). The Halifax Regional Centre for Education (HRCE), Nova Scotia's largest Centre for Education, exemplifies this trend. By 2024, newcomer students accounted for 11% of HRCE's total enrolment (HRCE, 2024). These patterns point to increasing linguistic and cultural diversity within the province's school systems, particularly in urban areas such as Halifax.

In Nova Scotia, EAL refers to students whose first language is not English and who require support to develop the academic language proficiency needed for school success (EECD, 2021). Although not all EAL students are newcomers, many newly arrived students are placed in this category and receive language support either from their classroom teacher or an EAL teacher (HRCE, 2024). In fact, according to the province's EAL/FAL framework, there were over 2700 students requiring EAL services in the 2019-2020 school year (EECD, 2021). These students often arrive with diverse linguistic and educational profiles. Some demonstrate strong academic

skills and multilingual competence, whereas others, particularly those with refugee backgrounds, may have experienced interrupted schooling or limited formal education (Wilkinson et al., 2013; Campbell, 2021; Gagné et al., 2021).

Language learning remains one of the main challenges newcomer students face in schools. Limited English proficiency can affect academic performance, classroom engagement, and school belonging, particularly when language support is confined to English Language Arts instruction and does not extend across the curriculum (Campbell, 2021; Gagné et al., 2021). Students who are the only English language learners in their class may also experience isolation or anxiety (Oikonomidoy, 2015). These challenges are compounded by intersecting factors such as racial background, cultural affiliation, religious beliefs, and gender (Jiménez-Castellanos & García, 2017; Sah & Zaidi, 2025).

In addition to academic and linguistic challenges, many newcomer students experience stressors related to migration and settlement. For some, this includes traumatic experiences from war, violence or displacement (Fazel, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2016; World Health Organization [WHO], 2023); for others, stress arises from adjusting to a new environment, navigating cultural differences, or coping with family separation (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016; Somo, 2024; WHO, 2023). These experiences can affect emotional regulation, behaviour, and engagement in school (Beloyianni & Touloumakos, 2025; Gallucci & Kassan, 2019). Cultural stigma around mental health may also discourage families from seeking support, and limited English proficiency can further complicate access to services when they are sought (Feng et al., 2023; Kirmayer et al., 2011).

Despite these challenges, newcomer students often show considerable strength. Research consistently finds that immigrant youth express a strong desire to succeed in school and pursue

post-secondary education (Shakya et al., 2012). Government data show that immigrant youth who arrive at younger ages are more likely to enrol in post-secondary education compared to those who arrive later (Government of Canada, 2025). These patterns emphasize both the importance of providing early effective support that builds on students' existing skills and affirms their cultural identities (Brown et al., 2020; Campbell, 2021; Gagné et al., 2021), as well as the need for additional, targeted supports for older newcomer youth, particularly in secondary school settings where academic and language demands are more complex and time to graduate becomes more limited.

The Role of School Psychologists

School psychologists play several important roles in supporting student well-being and learning. Their core responsibilities include assessment, intervention, consultation, and systems-level planning (Jimerson et al., 2024). In Nova Scotia, as in many other provinces, school psychologists primarily conduct psychoeducational assessments to inform student programming (Corkum et al., 2007; King et al., 2022). However, these assessments often rely on standardized tools developed and normed on monolingual English-speaking populations, raising concerns about their cultural and linguistic validity when used with newcomer students (Cadime & Mendes, 2024; Lopez & Bursztyn, 2013; Rhodes et al., 2005). Inappropriate or culturally incompatible assessment practices can lead to an increased risk of misdiagnosis, inappropriate placement or delayed intervention, which are factors that may contribute to disengagement, academic underachievement, and long-term mental health concerns (Graves et al., 2021; Vega et al., 2016). Recognizing these risks, school psychologists are also positioned to play a broader role in identifying mental health concerns, consulting with educators, supporting culturally responsive practices, and helping families navigate unfamiliar systems (Jimerson et al., 2024;

Somo, 2024). These responsibilities are particularly relevant in the context of increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in schools (EECD, 2021), where traditional models of service delivery may not fully meet students' needs.

Although research has increasingly examined the educational and social experiences of newcomer students in Canadian schools (e.g., Cranston et al., 2021; Gagné et al., 2021; Stewart, 2014), the perspectives and experiences of school psychologists remain underexplored. In particular, there is limited evidence on how school psychologists understand and enact their ethical responsibility to support culturally and linguistically diverse students. Given their roles in psychoeducational assessment, intervention, consultation, and systems-level planning, school psychologists are positioned to contribute meaningfully to equitable service delivery; however, little is known about how they approach these responsibilities when working with newcomer populations (Reyna et al., 2017; Robinson-Zañartu et al., 2019).

This gap in knowledge appears to coincide with changing understanding of cultural competence. Recent literature in psychology and education has increasingly emphasized the limitations of traditional definitions of cultural competence and advocated for a shift toward cultural humility (Lekas et al., 2020). Whereas cultural competence typically refers to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to work effectively with diverse populations, cultural humility is characterized as a lifelong process involving critical self-reflection, recognition of power imbalances, and responsiveness to individuals' lived experiences (Hook et al., 2013; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). This framework has been proposed as a potentially more sustainable approach to professional practice in contexts characterized by sociocultural diversity and change (Lekas et al., 2020). Professional standards within psychology have begun to incorporate these evolving frameworks. For example, the Canadian Psychological

Association's Code of Ethics highlights the importance of cultural awareness in avoiding the imposition of dominant norms and promoting respect for clients' sociocultural contexts (CPA, 2017). More recently, the CPA's revised accreditation standards require graduate training programs to prepare psychologists to integrate cultural safety, humility, and anti-oppressive practices into their professional roles (CPA, 2023).

Despite their importance and the focus on developing skills in these areas outlined in professional practice documents, studies suggest that many school psychologists report limited preparation in both cultural competence and cultural humility, both in their graduate training and professional development (Malone & Ishmail, 2020; Reyna et al., 2017). This lack of preparation may have particularly serious implications for newcomers, specifically those who are also EAL. Without adequate training in culturally and linguistically responsive practice, school psychologists may be less prepared to interpret assessment data accurately, identify appropriate supports, or advocate effectively for EAL students (Cadime & Mendes, 2024; Chan et al., 2025; Heidelburg et al., 2025; Reyna et al., 2017). Inadequate preparation in these areas has been associated with increased risk of misidentification, limited access to appropriate supports, and inconsistent service delivery for this student population (Cadime & Mendes, 2024; Vega et al., 2016).

Although these frameworks are increasingly emphasized in professional guidelines, research suggests that school psychologists often report limited preparation in these areas. Graduate-level coursework may introduce foundational concepts, but applied training specific to working with newcomer students remains limited (Malone & Ishmail, 2020; Reyna et al., 2017). Some studies suggest that skill development in professional psychology is most effective when it includes supervised practice, actionable feedback, coaching, and opportunities for reflection and

observation (Newell et al., 2010; Malone et al., 2025; O'Donovan et al., 2011). Without these, training may focus too heavily on theoretical knowledge, without equipping school psychologists with the right skills needed for practice in real-world settings. This is particularly relevant in Nova Scotia, where immigration is a relatively recent and growing trend, and where psychologists may encounter cultural and linguistic diversity without the benefit of targeted training or formal guidance. As such, further research is needed to understand how school psychologists perceive and respond to the needs of newcomer students in this evolving provincial context.

Given the changing demographics in Nova Scotia schools and the ethical responsibility to provide equitable services, it is essential to understand how school psychologists are currently supporting newcomer students and what challenges they may face in doing so. Whereas research on the educational and social experiences of newcomer students in Canadian schools is growing, studies exploring the specific roles, perspectives, and practices of school psychologists in this context remain limited. Some evidence suggests that school psychologists feel underprepared to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students, particularly when navigating language barriers, unfamiliar cultural frameworks, and the limitations of standardized assessment tools (Hernandez et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2019; Malone et al., 2025; Reyna et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2012). This gap is especially relevant in Nova Scotia, where immigration is now the main driver of population growth. Between July 2023 and July 2024, international immigration accounted for 88.9% of the province's total population increase (Nova Scotia Department of Finance and Treasury Board, 2024). As Nova Scotia's schools become more culturally and linguistically diverse, further research is needed to understand how school psychologists are responding to these changes and what supports they may require. Therefore, this study explored

the knowledge and experiences of Nova Scotia school psychologists in working with newcomer students, particularly those who are EAL. The objective of this study was to describe Nova Scotia school psychologists' responses when asked to reflect on their experiences working with newcomer students along with the strengths and limitations in their current practice.

Method

Research Design

This study used a qualitative descriptive design (Osborne & Smith, 2008; Sandelowski, 2000) using individual semi-structured interviews. The qualitative descriptive method was chosen due to its ability to provide descriptions of participants' experiences using language that closely reflects their own words along with verbatim quotes. This approach is particularly valuable in healthcare and educational research where understanding the practical experiences and viewpoints of professionals is critical for informing practice and policy. It allowed for capturing the depth and complexity of school psychologists' shared experiences without imposing pre-existing theories or frameworks on the data (see Sandelowski, 2000). This study aimed to reflect participants' voices while acknowledging that these accounts represent what they chose to share in the interview. This study received clearance from the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University.

Participants

Nine school psychologists currently employed in Nova Scotia public schools participated in the study. This represents approximately 10% of psychologists currently practicing in schools in the province ($N = 87$). Participants were recruited through the Psychologists in Schools Association (PISA) and professional word of mouth. All participants worked for a Regional Centre for Education (RCE) at the time of their participation in the study and three out of the

nine also worked part-time in private practice. All participants self-identified as female. Their years of experience ranged from 1.5 to 27 years. Refer to Table 1 for details related to participant demographics.

Measures

An interview guide was developed by the authors for the purpose of this study (see Appendix A). The interview guide included 17 questions designed to elicit detailed information about the participants' experiences and knowledge related to working with newcomer students. Questions were related to the school psychologist's background, how they receive referrals for newcomer students, their knowledge of newcomer programming and support, their experiences with newcomer programming and support, and the challenges they face working with these students. Probing questions were asked as needed in follow-up to expand on the topics discussed.

Participants also completed a brief demographics questionnaire (see Appendix B), that collected information related to participants' self-identified gender, language(s) spoken, years of experience in schools, and practice setting. This information was used to contextualize participant responses and examine variability across their professional backgrounds.

Procedure

Following initial contact with psychologists, an email was sent to potential participants containing information about the study and the researchers' contact information (Appendix C). For participants who expressed interest, an appointment was scheduled on a date and time of their choosing. Participants also received a link to an individual confidential folder containing the consent form (Appendix D) and the demographics questionnaire (Appendix B). Interviews took place virtually via Microsoft Teams from December 2024 to February 2025. All participants consented to visual and audio recording for transcription purposes. Interviews were between 45

minutes to approximately an hour in length. Following the interviews, videos were transcribed. Transcriptions were then reviewed and edited for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Within the framework of qualitative description, this study aimed to provide a direct account of participants' experiences using their own words, with minimal interpretive inference (Sandelowski, 2000). Responses were analyzed according to the primary areas of questioning as outlined in the interview guide, including referral processes, knowledge, experiences, challenges, and positive experiences. The analysis was guided broadly by principles of thematic analysis to support a structured and transparent approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Findings are presented descriptively, maintaining participants' words to provide an authentic representation of their experiences.

Results

Clarification of Terminology

Although English as an Additional Language (EAL) formally refers to students requiring targeted language instruction (see Chapter One), in practice, the term is often used informally in school settings to describe newcomer students more generally. It is important to note that not all EAL learners are newcomers, and not all newcomer students are designated as EAL. However, the two terms are frequently used interchangeably in school-based discussions and referral processes. In this study, the term *newcomer* is used to acknowledge the experience of recent immigration, which may include but is not limited to learning English as an additional language. It is acknowledged that participants may have used the terms "EAL" and "newcomer" interchangeably during interviews to refer to this population.

Summary of Findings

The analysis identified a range of common experiences amongst participants. Some of the topics discussed include the variability in the number of referrals, with some psychologists reporting more frequent referrals than others, usually as a result of regional demographic differences. Participants also frequently discussed limited formal training and professional development opportunities. The use of interpreters and translation services was also discussed at length. Ethical concerns related to informed consent, diagnostic accuracy, and cultural assumptions were acknowledged. Participants described barriers to evidence-based practices, especially when working with students still learning English or who had experienced traumatic events. Consultation and interdisciplinary collaboration were important supports for many, whereas preparedness and confidence working with this population varied based on experience, exposure, and access to resources. Despite challenges, participants also shared many positive experiences from their time working with newcomer and EAL students and families.

Referral Frequency, Process, and Reasons

Participants described variability in how often they received referrals for newcomer students. These differences were closely tied to school demographics and regional newcomer populations. Urban school psychologists generally reported more frequent referrals, with one noting that "every second referral would be for a student who is somewhere along their process of learning English." In contrast, school psychologists working in rural settings described more mixed experiences where some received one or two newcomer referrals per year, while others had not received any, even across multiple years. As one participant explained, "I think one of the main reasons probably I have not [received any referrals] is because of the area I work in. I

feel like it's probably in the last probably year or two that there's been more EAL students in the schools where I work."

School psychologists consistently described academic, behavioural, and social-emotional challenges as common reasons for referral. These included concerns about literacy, comprehension, math learning, and behavioural regulation, particularly in students with traumatic migration experiences. Some school teams were reported to make premature referrals soon after students arrived, sometimes without consideration of adjustment needs. A few participants expressed concern that these early referrals sometimes reflected misunderstandings of behavioural responses or unfamiliarity with language developmental trajectories, thereby prompting school teams to occasionally jump to diagnoses like ADHD within weeks of the student's arrival.

Concerns related to interpreting previous schooling records, missing academic or health records, and requests to translate psychoeducational reports from students' home countries also prompted referrals. A few participants emphasized that, in some cases, the issue was not cognitive or learning ability, but rather the student's unfamiliarity with Canadian school norms or routines. As such, the referral process for newcomer students was described as predominantly consultative and typically initiated in response to academic behavioural or adjustment concerns. This consultative approach meant that most referrals were focused on problem-solving rather than formal assessment; this was a similar experience across all participants, who often viewed the referral as a path to additional support for families and school teams. Several participants described needing to redirect referrals or provide alternative forms of support when assessment was not warranted or feasible. Sometimes this included referrals to paediatricians, social workers, or other specialists. They emphasized the importance of collaborative consultation with

school teams, often through Teaching Support Teams (TSTs), to clarify referral appropriateness and explore other options if need.

Although most participants felt that referrals were generally appropriate, there was uncertainty across the group regarding when formal assessment should occur. A commonly referenced "five-year rule" was described by multiple participants; however, some questioned its validity and shared that they had assessed students earlier when appropriate. Whereas some adhered to this guideline, others viewed it as an outdated or misinterpreted rule. One psychologist explained:

> Basically, people thought there was this hard and fast rule where it was like, someone has to be in the country for five years before we're going to assess them. But it became quite apparent that we couldn't actually support the kids with hard and fast rules because there were several of them that needed supports right away. So, it was figuring out how to do that in a way that was valid and could support them while being really mindful of the fact that they didn't have a lot of English yet. I think it was more of a guideline that someone along the way decided must have been a rule, but I don't think it ever actually was [a rule].

Ultimately, school psychologists emphasized the importance of case-by-case decision-making that considers the individual student's background, readiness, and current functioning not just their time in Canada. The unique role of a school psychologist also allows them to support school teams in other ways outside of direct service with students. One participant elaborated on this idea:

> I think school psychologists are uniquely positioned in the education system to have more invested interest in learning more. There's no place in the province I wouldn't say that a school psychologist wouldn't be the right person to make a referral to if a school doesn't

> know what to do with a newcomer student or what they need…We're uniquely positioned to support that, and [there is] not necessarily any[one] else in the system --other than the EAL teachers-- who would do that advocacy piece for kids.

Whereas there was general confidence in their ability to support referral processes, school psychologists acknowledged ongoing gaps in knowledge and confidence when working with newcomer populations.

Knowledge About Supporting Newcomer Students

School psychologists described three main areas related to their knowledge of supporting newcomer students: graduate training, professional development, and informal learning. Individual experiences varied, and most participants reported limited formal preparation and emphasized that their learning in this area has been predominantly self-directed and situational.

Graduate Program Training and Preparation

Participants overwhelmingly reported minimal to no formal preparation in their graduate study programs for working with newcomer or EAL students. Most described their training as theoretical in nature, often limited to general ethics or diversity courses with little emphasis on practical skill development. Some described these experiences as "reflective," "broad," or "surface-level," noting that they lacked specific strategies or hands-on experiences relevant to working with linguistically and culturally diverse students. As one psychologist recalled, "I wouldn't say there was much, if any, training that involved practical experiences" and continued, "even in class we were all one skin colour, you know?" Across participants, descriptors such as "none," "zero" or "very few" were used to describe their exposure to topics directly related to supporting newcomers. Some recalled assignments that prompted cultural exploration or self-reflection, but rarely did these translate into actionable skills.

Although most school psychologists trained in Canadian programs, one described a more comprehensive experience in a non-Canadian program. They shared that their training included "doing an assessment on a student who comes from a non-native English speaking or a diverse background." In addition to this, instruction was provided on language acquisition, assessment considerations for English learners, and using specific assessment tools. Overall, participants repeatedly emphasized that although general training in diversity was helpful, it did not provide them with the applied knowledge needed to assess or intervene effectively with newcomer students.

Professional Development and Informal Learning

Most participants reported limited access to professional development (PD) related specifically to newcomer or EAL populations. When PD was available, it tended to be general in focus, such as general diversity or anti-racism topics, and not specific to the role of school psychologists. One participant recalled a single PD session on culturally responsive assessment at an external conference, while others mentioned online modules focused on general cultural awareness. These sessions were seen as helpful and sometimes reflective, but insufficient.

Instead, participants described relying heavily on informal learning, which involved consulting with colleagues, engaging in case-based problem solving, collaborating with EAL teachers, and seeking out online resources. This form of "learning on the fly" was often reactive, as it was prompted by receiving a referral for a newcomer student or other unfamiliar cases. In some regions, professional learning groups, when available, offered the opportunity to ask questions and share insights, though direct training on supporting newcomer students was rarely included in these opportunities. Some school psychologists sought out additional graduate education to fill this gap, describing these experiences as "eye-opening" and "mind-expanding,"

particularly in how they discussed systemic inequities and the design of schooling in Nova Scotia. They contrasted this with the limited attention paid to these topics in school psychology training and the need for continuous learning: “It was not really acknowledged in the school psychology training that I received… It's not a line of career where you are ever really finished or at a point where you know enough.”

One participant described PD in their former district in the United States that included training for all school staff, including psychologists, on supporting English language learners. “They would also do explicit testing with all English language learning students… psychologists would get some PD around what the assessment entails, what it means, and what the implications are.” The participant described this approach as more embedded and proactive than what they had observed in Nova Scotia. This participant also reflected on these cultural conversations in the province, describing that:

> There's some differing mindsets, where people [in Nova Scotia] haven't had some of those core beliefs challenged yet and haven't had the need to have reflection and conversation around how do we make sure that our school spaces feel welcoming and inclusive to everybody?

Across the board, school psychologists characterized their knowledge development in this area as largely self-directed, situational, and fragmented. Whereas many expressed a commitment to continued learning, they also noted the lack of coordinated or sustained efforts at the regional or provincial level to provide adequate PD for school psychologists to support newcomers effectively.

Experiences Working with Newcomer Students

Participants described their experiences working with newcomer students across three areas: services provided, family involvement, and the use of interpretation and translation services. Their roles were often consultative and varied by context, many noted that their sense of competence developed primarily through experience rather than formal training. Participants described both the importance and complexity of engaging families, as well as ongoing challenges related to consistent and accurate language support.

Services Provided

School psychologists described their involvement with newcomer students as predominantly consultative, often occurring in response to specific challenges rather than through proactive or preventative programming. Participants frequently supported teams in problem-solving related to academic, behavioural, and adjustment-related concerns, even when the original referral suggested a need for formal assessment. The focus often shifted to building understanding and safety for the student before even considering assessment. In some cases, collaboration with families brought up important cultural insights that helped reframe the presenting concerns. For example, one participant provided an example of consultation and collaborative problem-solving where cultural insights shared by a parent changed the team's understanding of that student's learning needs:

> One of the concerns that the teachers had brought up was that the student would often take a lot of time to seemingly think about what their response was [going to] be. Mom was able to share that actually in their home, in their culture, they teach the children to take time to respond and to not just speak without thinking.

However, perceived competence in working with newcomer students varied. Most participants reported that their sense of competence seemed more connected to their job experience rather than formal training. One school psychologist noted feeling initially unsure but "more competent now." They recalled, "at the beginning when I first started getting newcomers, I did not feel competent…over time, I became more competent. Now I do feel fully competent if I get an EAL student." On the other hand, others expressed uncertainty, particularly in cases involving assessment or a history of traumatic experiences. A few participants with prior experience in diverse communities or additional training expressed greater confidence but were cautious not to generalize their comfort level due to their additional training.

Family Involvement

Participants emphasized the importance as well as the complexity of engaging newcomer families meaningfully in psychological services. In general, family involvement ranged from consultation and background interviews to participation in formal interviews. Most participants noted that families were engaged to some degree, often bringing along extended family members, neighbours or religious leaders for support during school meetings. As one participant shared, "It's not uncommon for families in general to bring a support person into a meeting." These individuals played important roles in helping families feel comfortable and ensuring that information was understood.

A main concern that emerged was ensuring truly informed consent when working across language barriers. Whereas interpreters were widely used and often facilitated more accessible collaboration, participants acknowledged ongoing uncertainty about whether families fully understood the voluntary nature of services being offered. Several school psychologists raised concerns about confidentiality, accuracy, and trust when working through third parties. If

interpreters were involved, there was some concern about the ability to have private and sensitive conversations when others were present. However, the value of having interpreters available was acknowledged by participants, even when parents were conversational in English, as this gave families greater freedom and accuracy in expressing complex thoughts and helped with rapport building. One participant shared, "she may have not needed the interpreter, but she had the ability to rely on that interpreter to help her convey her thoughts in a way that she [wanted]."

Parental perceptions were also important considerations, as one psychologist recalled an experience working with a parent whom the school team initially perceived as a poor advocate for their child:

> When Mom came in, she didn't really say a lot of the stuff that she was concerned about. She didn't want to ask for anything because she was just so glad that she was there, she didn't feel like she could. The school thought she just wasn't very articulate or wasn't very educated or wasn't forthcoming. But I'm like, that's not what's going on here. She's a nurse…she's an educated woman and she could advocate very strongly for her son in [home country]. But she didn't yet feel safe doing it here. So, through the process along with the African-Nova Scotian support worker, getting that diagnosis, and talking, she was able to better advocate for him. She found the courage to do it. So, there's that piece too, like these families have worked really hard to get themselves here and it is not easy. It is time-consuming, expensive, stressful, and confusing. It's just a whole other layer that needs to be taken into account. Even after IRCC, there's also all the other stuff that you have to figure out logistically, like getting a doctor, getting a health card, there's so many things you have to figure out how to do and rebuild in a new country. I'm an English

speaker and it was a lot. I can't even imagine it for the people that don't speak the language and look different and have a different culture.

Interpretation and Translation Services

Accessing interpretation services was described as essential in many cases but inconsistently available. Participants working in urban regions or regions with larger newcomer populations described better coordination of these services, whereas others in rural areas reported challenges finding interpreters, scheduling them promptly or ensuring they were familiar with educational and psychological terminology. Some expressed concern that interpreters lacked background knowledge about the student or family, which could affect rapport. There were also practical and ethical concerns such as relying on EAL teachers or other staff to arrange interpreter services, which raised questions about confidentiality.

School psychologists acknowledged that interpretation for psychological services requires a special skill set as the interpreter would need to understand both the psychological and educational jargon and relay that information objectively and accurately to families. Translating assessment materials, such as rating scales, led to confusion for some interpreters, especially with questionnaires that included abstract language or diagnostic language such as “acts as if driven by a motor.” There were also instances where shared language did not guarantee comfort, particularly when the interpreter came from a different religious or cultural background than the family.

At the same time, informal translation methods, such as using websites or apps, were used and sometimes necessary for students and families to communicate needs. School psychologists emphasized that these informal translation tools should be treated as essential communication supports. One participant reflected on this:

> When we have kids with autism who are nonverbal, they're nonspeaking, they usually carry a talker or a PECS book with them, and we often use terminology like 'it's their words.' And so, wherever they go, whatever they do, they have to have their words with them because I carry my words with me. They're in my brain. They're in my voice. So, everybody has a right to carry their words with them. That thought, in my experience, which is limited, is not being generalized to students who have English as a second language.

Beyond in-person interpretation, challenges extended to translation of documents and psychoeducational reports from students' home countries. Some school psychologists shared examples of schools attempting to use tools like Google Translate to translate reports or asking parents to which led to confusion and incomplete information. Participants expressed a need for standard procedures to translate important documents. Overall, participants viewed language access as essential to building trust and partnership with families.

Challenges in Supporting Newcomer Students

A range of systemic, ethical, and practical challenges were encountered by school psychologists when supporting newcomer students. This included navigating ethical issues, applying evidence-based practices, engaging in consultation, and feeling prepared to meet students' needs. Most participants expressed a strong commitment to providing equitable service, but many described limited guidance, insufficient tools, and structural barriers that sometimes hindered their ability to respond effectively.

Ethical Issues and Concerns

Participants identified a range of ethical challenges encountered when supporting newcomer students, particularly in relation to informed consent and the risk of misdiagnosis.

Across interviews, informed consent was reported as a primary ethical concern, particularly when language barriers limited families' understanding of assessment processes. It was acknowledged that, "if there's a language barrier, then you really have to navigate the consent piece carefully." School psychologists emphasized that consent must be both informed and voluntary, which can be difficult to communicate. In some cases, schools obtained signed consent prior to having direct conversations first to which participants reported discomfort with continuing.

Several participants also shared discomfort with not knowing whether their messages were being conveyed accurately, or how parents interpreted what was being said. At times, families expressed a preference for a support person over interpreters, raising questions about how to balance ethical guidelines with client autonomy. A participant recalled a situation where parents "really didn't want the interpreter," and had asked for the interpreter to leave:

> I was in a strange place in terms of ethics, [because] yes, am I posing some risks around the only person in the room who could speak both languages being the daughter? I was trying to weigh what I was doing here, like there is the right of the parent to have confidentiality and that number one principle versus --yes there may be some risk and liability around if that is misinterpreted to parents.

Some participants expressed wanting clearer guidance from their professional and regulatory body in these situations, particularly when the use of interpreters conflicts with parental preferences for trusted community members or relatives.

There were also concerns raised about the growing use of informal translation methods such as Google Translate or the use of personal devices and their implications for privacy. In particular, the appropriateness of these tools for psychological content, but also questioning the

safety and security of these tools which may compromise students' personal information. Ethical concerns also extended to diagnosis and assessment. Participants spoke about the risk of unintentionally pathologizing cultural or linguistic differences. Additionally, the balance between being cautious and being helpful was a recurring concern from school psychologists. Some expressed worry about testing or diagnosing a student who has not yet had sufficient access to EAL support or enough exposure. There were also practical and ethical considerations to be made which sometimes required school psychologists to delay providing a diagnosis. One participant encountered a situation when assessing a student without Canadian permanent resident status:

> I also had to navigate the immigration status of the mom and him because I'm like, he has an intellectual disability, absolutely has an intellectual disability…I don't [want to] jeopardize his PR status in Canada if I diagnose it. So, we had to make sure that he already had his PR so that he was safe from that before we went on with it.

Additionally, several participants also explained the need for psychologists to reflect on their own cultural assumptions when disagreements about diagnoses with families arises. One stated that this can be "uncomfortable sometimes" and "it might bother us because we feel like it's not the best interest of the child. That's a very Western bias. It could be that actually keeping things quiet in that time is in the best interest of the child."

In addition to individual situations, participants raised broader systemic issues that contributed to ethical concerns. School psychologists noted inequities in access to EAL or learning support services, particularly for students with complex needs. At times, students who displayed unsafe behaviours or were supported by the Learning Centre were sometimes excluded from EAL support and vice versa. On the other hand, there was also concern that students with

less visible needs may “fly under the radar” and not receive services that could be helpful to them. Some participants also raised concerns about the lack of cultural understanding among some staff. As one noted, “I think that primarily it's the ignorance, is the word I'll use in a very polite way… they don't have the knowledge, or they don't have the experience, or they are not going to seek that out on their own.”

Barriers to Evidence-Based Practices

Participants described several barriers that limited their ability to implement evidence-based practices. The main concerns highlighted included cultural and language differences, assessment validity, as well as timeline and resource constraints. Cultural mismatches sometimes made it difficult to engage families with recommendations. Some psychologists noted that differing beliefs about behaviour or disability could lead to resistance or misinterpretation of feedback. Others described pacing their services differently depending on families’ readiness or familiarity with school systems. As one participant explained,

> I have to slow my pace down to give the adults time to come along. And I probably also have to create more evidence to show them why these approaches need to be done as opposed to maybe just like a reward and punishment for hitting. The pace has to be slower, and you have to have a lot of patience.

Concerns about assessment timelines also persisted. Participants challenged outdated practices such as waiting five years before evaluating EAL students, calling these exclusionary: “so they’re just like floundering? Like we can’t just deny them everything for five years.” Many worried that formal assessments were being withheld when students could, in fact, benefit from early identification. At the same time, there was broad recognition that many standardized tools were not designed for culturally or linguistically diverse students. One participant admitted, “I

don't have a lot of confidence that my tools are the best to assess a student's ability. I don't know that they're normed appropriately for newcomer students. I don't know that they're really capturing all their knowledge." Despite these barriers, some participants noted progress in recent years, pointing to increased diversity, community resources, and shifting attitudes towards equitable services for students.

Consultation Process

Consultation was recognized as an important part of the process for ethical decision-making and clinical reasoning when working with newcomer students. School psychologists regularly consulted with NSBEP supervisors, colleagues or former classmates to confirm decisions, seek alternative perspectives or brainstorm ideas. Whereas most participants felt supported through informal networks, several noted a lack of clearly identified experts in newcomer issues within the psychology community. As one participant compared, "If someone specializes in OCD or a certain population, I know I can go to them. But I don't know who to go to for newcomers…and part of our ethical problem solving is to consult with those who know."

Interdisciplinary collaboration was another important practice identified by participants. EAL teachers were frequently cited as the "go-to" professionals for understanding students' language skills, cultural backgrounds, and day-to-day functioning. School psychologists also consulted with social workers, educational assistants, and other support staff to help fully understand the student's needs and to strengthen rapport with families. A few participants acknowledged being seen as the most experienced person in their region, which limited their ability to consult beyond themselves. In such cases, some reached out to colleagues in other provinces or even internationally for additional input.

Whereas the school psychology field was described as slowly improving in this area, several participants felt the broader education system still lacked a consistent, systemic approach to supporting newcomers. A participant reflected on this further:

> Even though we're getting better at it from a school psych lens, there's just something that's not being done right in general from the education lens…we need to do something better as a system to support the English learning, especially in the upper grades.

Overall, participants saw consultation as an essential tool for ethical practice, but many wished for more formalized pathways to expert support, shared tools, and leadership in this area.

Preparedness to Support Newcomer Students

Participants described varying levels of preparedness when supporting newcomer students. Many felt underprepared to support students who had experienced traumatic events, especially those with refugee backgrounds. The interaction between exposure to trauma, adjustment, and academic needs was viewed as difficult to differentiate.

Several school psychologists reported a lack of confidence in the suitability of current assessment tools when working with newcomer students. Specifically, cognitive assessments were reported as inappropriate or uninformative for newcomer students. As one participant added, “I wouldn't feel super confident giving a cognitive assessment to a student who is an English language learner --I very likely wouldn't do that.” In light of these limitations, participants expressed interest in more informal and culturally appropriate tools to use when standardized assessments were not suitable. They also reported an increasing interest in this topic within professional development settings, though noted the need for more systemic investment.

Whereas some participants felt underprepared, others reported feeling increasingly confident due to accumulated experience and access to consultation. However, there was

uncertainty, especially when formal supports or school-level readiness were lacking. Even those who felt prepared emphasized that systemic barriers continued to interfere with effective implementation. As one explained, “We can make the best plan ever, but if there’s no one to implement it, then it’s not going to work.”

Supports Available to School Psychologists

School psychologists reflected on the supports available to them when working with newcomer students, including administrative support, strategies used in practice, and perceived gaps in training and resources. Many participants described collaborative relationships with administrators and school teams; however, they also noted inconsistencies in knowledge, preparation, and system-level infrastructure.

Administrative Support

Participants generally described school and regional administrators as supportive, especially in respecting their professional judgment and intervention plans. This support was often strongest in schools with higher newcomer populations, where systems were already in place to respond efficiently to student needs. However, some participants noted administrators' limited understanding of EAL-related issues, leading to premature referrals or a lack of appropriate follow-up. These instances required school psychologists to educate administrators on the timing and appropriateness of assessments. Several participants also expressed that while administrators were open and collaborative, they were often overwhelmed by competing demands and lacked the time or expertise to further their understanding of newcomer needs. A few described feeling isolated and “on my own” when navigating complex decisions without specialized support, particularly in schools less familiar with working with EAL students.

Some participants described administrators as being generally very supportive and open-minded. However, even with increasing newcomer student populations, there was limited or slow growth observed in administrators' knowledge of supporting newcomers. As one participant elaborated, "The growth itself is just not nearly increasing at the level of the population… it's just too slow." Several participants expressed a desire to build capacity within schools, seeing their role as one of collaborative learning. They described efforts to "walk alongside" administrators and educators, gradually building understanding of the needs of newcomer students.

Strategies for Supporting Students

Participants described a range of strategies to support newcomer students focused on building trust, collaborating with families and staff, and adapting assessment and communication practices. Relationship-focused approaches were consistently the focus among participants. Participants emphasized that establishing rapport with families, particularly those unfamiliar with the school system, was essential. They described their efforts as more collaborative, aiming to create space for families to share concerns and participate meaningfully in decision-making.

Collaboration extended beyond families to include colleagues, support staff, or sometimes community members. Some participants emphasized that trusted relationships with student support workers or interpreters helped with cultural and linguistic gaps. One shared, "Helping to build trust with the family and working with the African Nova Scotian support worker and Mom was a game changer." When such supports were present, participants observed improved family engagement and more productive conversations.

Assessment practices were often adapted to meet the needs of newcomer students, particularly when formal tools were seen as being misaligned with students' language

proficiency or cultural context. Participants reported relying more heavily on interviews, observations, and classroom work samples in these cases, using flexible methods to understand student functioning and to identify strengths. These strategies allowed them to make informed recommendations without over-relying on standardized scores, which were sometimes seen as insufficient or inappropriate for this population. Others drew on their training in behavioural analysis to uncover the function of behaviours for some students and identify needs.

Practical and logistical planning were also highlighted. Strategies such as using Google Translate for informal interactions, scheduling longer meetings when interpreters were present, and proactively setting clear agendas were also used to help with communication. School psychologists emphasized that these minor, intentional adjustments made a significant difference in ensuring families felt informed, respected, and included in the process. Overall, participants stressed that effective support for newcomer students required a team approach built on shared responsibility, consultation, and helping school teams think critically and compassionately about the student in front of them.

Support Needs

School psychologists expressed a wide range of needs related to their ability to effectively support newcomer students. Whereas most participants demonstrated a strong commitment to culturally responsive practice, they also identified significant gaps in resources, training, tools, and system-level infrastructure. Among these was a lack of professional development specific to the roles and responsibilities of school psychologists. Many felt that existing PD was generic and designed for educators or support staff and lacked the depth or clinical relevance needed for their work. There was a shared call for advanced, targeted training

focused on assessment and trauma-informed practice, particularly as they relate to newcomer populations.

Participants also highlighted the importance of continuous, reflective learning over single-session workshops. As one psychologist shared, "[PD] opportunities are typically one and done… people sit in them, and they move on. We need to do a better job of encouraging our members to be in that lifelong learning state." They called for sustained professional development that encouraged ongoing growth, relationship-building with community partners, and deeper understanding of these issues in their roles. Several suggested that existing community-based organizations, such as the Association of Psychologists of Nova Scotia and African Nova Scotian Affairs, are reputable organizations within the province that could be providing PD.

Concerns about the inadequacy of current assessment tools were also commonly highlighted. School psychologists noted the limitations of relying on English language measures when working with students who were still learning the language or whose cultural experiences differed from normative samples. Many expressed discomfort when making high-stakes decisions with tools they viewed as insufficient or misaligned with students' backgrounds. Several advocated for interpreters to be integrated earlier in the process, ideally during the intake and consent phases and not only for interpretative purposes but also to build trust and continuity with families. The idea of establishing relational connections between interpreters and families upon enrolment, rather than waiting until an assessment was underway, was seen as a promising practice to increase cultural safety and engagement.

Whereas participants discussed their own professional needs, many also called for broader system-level change. One school psychologist argued that more resources must be

allocated to frontline staff as well: “More training for teachers… more training on a broader scope on how to welcome newcomers into our buildings.” Another reinforced this, stating, “It’s on our employer to be doing that…our Department of Education should have the financial piece invested for us all to become more competent --not just school psychologists, but teachers, all of it.” Participants described educators struggling to support newcomer students without adequate tools or strategies, and emphasized that school-wide inclusion efforts, trauma-informed teaching, and cultural responsiveness should not fall solely to school psychologists.

One insight related to the need for more applied, hands-on experience with newcomer populations particularly during training. A school psychologist reflected, “Lectures and books are useful, obviously. But…what do I do when a human is in front of me saying things that weren’t in that book?” Some participants proposed experiential learning opportunities in graduate programs, such as supervised placements with newcomer populations, to ensure early exposure and feedback. Others expressed a lack of clarity about what resources exist due to limited exposure about what is available. Overall, participants expressed a strong interest in learning more but emphasized that true preparedness comes from direct hands-on learning experiences.

Positive Experiences with Newcomer Students

Despite the challenges involved in supporting newcomer students, participants emphasized several rewarding aspects of this work. A commonality was the meaningful relationships they developed with newcomer families. These relationships were often described as collaborative and offered mutual appreciation and trust. Participants highlighted the satisfaction of seeing families feel welcomed, understood, and supported within the school system. One school psychologist shared:

> I feel like just getting to know the families and helping them feel comfortable in our school system that is the most fulfilling part of it for sure. Like seeing their wall come down after you have a couple meetings with them, or them being so grateful and appreciative of what we're providing for them. And like a lot of times, they'll be like, oh wow, Canada is so nice, like in my home country they would just kick him out of school or whatever. So that is really fulfilling, just the family connection piece, for sure.

These connections were particularly meaningful when families began to share more openly about their experiences and concerns, especially with the help of interpreters or trusted support persons. One school psychologist recalled a particularly meaningful interaction with a parent during a phone call with an interpreter:

> The mom was just so appreciative of being able to express herself… she said, I can talk a little, I can understand what you're saying to me, but I can never fully express myself, and so she was so appreciative of having opportunity to share everything about her child.

Participants noted that these moments helped families express themselves more fully and allowed psychologists to gain better insights into the students' backgrounds, strengths, and needs.

Watching students grow over time was another source of fulfillment. Participants spoke of the joy in witnessing students gradually adapt to their new environment, socially, linguistically, and academically. The progression from initial challenges to confident participation was described as a rewarding experience. These moments also provided opportunities for psychologists to learn from their students, with some participants noting their own cultural growth and appreciation for different worldviews.

Working with newcomer students was described not only as professionally enriching, but also personally transformative. Participants noted that the work prompted them to reflect on their own values, increased their cultural awareness, and inspired them to continue learning. One psychologist reflected on the insight gained through working with an interpreter, "Giving them the opportunity to say it in their language… they can share so much more depth of information," adding, "I enjoyed learning about them, what they value, and realizing that I kind of value those things too."

In addition to relationship-building and cultural learning, participants also found value in using psychoeducational assessments to reframe student narratives. One school psychologist shared an example of this: "The school kept talking about his learning challenges but sometimes what comes out of a psych-ed is also a lot of strengths and positives. I felt like I was able to share some really wonderful things about their child." This helped shift school perceptions away from deficit-based thinking. These were particularly important during school transitions and when advocating for appropriate supports. Participants reflected on how this strength-based perspective could positively affect students' self-concept and future goals.

Resilience was another notable theme. Participants expressed admiration for the perseverance of both students and families who had endured displacement, loss, and resettlement. One school psychologist emphasized:

> I think that they're brilliant and I always tell them I only know one language and the fact that you can sit there, even if it's hard, and communicate with me in a language that's brand new to you and you might even know others is amazing. I think that these families, they've made a huge move across the world for whatever reasons, some of them have gone through a heck of a lot before they got here…it's like the resilience, the strength,

> just the ability to bounce back and focus on their kids and how they can help them now in this new environment is just like amazing, inspiring. I love that whole community.

Some participants reflected more broadly on how newcomer communities contribute to school culture and deepen interpersonal understanding. A school psychologist shared,

> I think that it's a wonderful, wonderful thing for our province to be welcoming newcomers. It's a wonderful thing for our communities to expand their knowledge and become more aware…I've benefited from realizing that the experience of coming to a new country, and what that all entails. Like my ancestors did that, it wasn't something that was part of my world.

Overall, participants described both challenges and success in supporting newcomer students. Commonalities included ethical complexities, consultation practices, professional development needs, and the importance of building relationships.

Discussion

This study explored the knowledge, experiences, and perceived challenges of school psychologists in Nova Scotia when supporting newcomer students, particularly those learning English as an additional language (EAL). The findings show a profession that is rapidly trying to adapt to a shifting demographic landscape with limited formal preparation, varying access to resources, and yet a strong commitment to ethical, culturally responsive practice. In the context of increasing immigration to Atlantic Canada and the corresponding diversification of school populations (Government of Canada, 2023), the perspectives of Nova Scotia school psychologists provide important insight into both current practices and systemic limitations in newcomer student support.

Assessment Practices with Newcomer Students

Although school psychologists in Nova Scotia are traditionally focused on psychoeducational assessment (King et al., 2022), the findings of this study demonstrate that their roles are expanding to include more consultation and collaboration with interdisciplinary teams in support of newcomer students. Participants emphasized that referrals related to academic and behavioural needs of newcomer students were increasing in frequency, particularly in areas with larger newcomer populations. This observation reflects recent trends in provincial enrolment data, which indicate a growing number of EAL learners in the public school system (HRCE, 2023). However, the uneven distribution of referrals, which ranged from zero to every referral, shows that there may be regional disparities in newcomer populations and in the readiness of their respective schools to respond. Participants consistently highlighted the need to carefully contextualize referral questions, particularly given the risk of misinterpreting language acquisition difficulties or behaviours related to traumatic experiences as learning or mental health disorders. As stressed by Robinson-Zañartu et al. (2019), dual language learners (DLLs) are often either over- or under-identified for special education due to a lack of assessment practices that distinguish between typical additional language development and true cognitive or psychological difficulties. Despite some promising practices, such as dynamic assessment, consultation with individuals familiar with the student's background, and use of trained interpreters, they are not yet widely implemented. Without access to such tools and strategies, school psychologists remain at risk of misdiagnosing newcomer students.

Several participants described experiences with the belief that psychoeducational assessment should be deferred for five years following a student's arrival in Canada. This rule does not appear in the current provincial EAL/FAL guidelines (EECD, 2021) or in school

psychology professional practice guidelines (CPA, 2007; NASP 2020). Rather, it reflects an informal policy that, although unsupported by empirical evidence or formal guidance, persists in practice and contributes to delays in assessment and intervention. School teams relying on this "five-year rule" may inadvertently postpone access to supports, placing newcomer students at risk of prolonged academic difficulties. Others challenged this belief, emphasizing the ethical obligation to provide timely assessment and support. As outlined by Cadime and Mendes (2024), school psychologists must use a case-by-case approach grounded in evidence, informed consent, and fairness in assessment. This includes understanding language acquisition trajectories and differentiating between language-based challenges and disabilities. In fact, school psychologists are meant to advocate for early screening and intervention, especially when academic or behavioural concerns are evident (Robinson-Zañartu et al., 2019).

A lack of formal training in assessment practices with newcomer and EAL students was frequently acknowledged. Many participants noted that their graduate-level courses emphasized theoretical knowledge and ethical reasoning but provided limited exposure to applied practice in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts. Gross and Malone (2019) documented variability in multicultural coursework across North American school psychology programmes, with many offering only a single stand-alone course. From an international perspective, Zhang et al. (2024) reported similar inconsistencies worldwide, concluding that multicultural and international competencies were often infused rather than systematically scaffolded, which may lead to uneven skill development among graduates. This pattern aligns with findings by Vega et al. (2018), who observed that multicultural courses tend to increase awareness and empathy but may fall short of preparing students for real-world complexities.

Whereas self-awareness is a critical component of cultural competence (Sue et al., 1998), awareness alone is insufficient without the applied skills needed to implement equitable practices in assessment, consultation, and intervention. Recent qualitative work by Malone et al. (2025) found that students perceive culturally responsive skills as developing most effectively when coursework is paired with a supportive program climate and supervised field experiences that explicitly model best practice. Lopez and Bursztyn (2013) similarly suggest that culturally responsive training must be embedded throughout the entire structure of school psychology programs. Rather than adding isolated diversity content to existing courses, they recommend an integrated, transformative approach that integrates diversity-related topics across coursework, field placements, and supervision as well as addresses how race, language, socioeconomic status, and migration shape development and service delivery.

Newell et al. in 2010 argued that programs must provide not only knowledge but also supervised experiences with diverse populations to ensure that school psychologists can deliver culturally competent services. Yet few programs offer such practical training, and even fewer address the specific challenges of assessing multilingual learners (Cooper et al., 2024; Hernandez et al., 2024; Jimerson et al., 2024; Lopez & Bursztyn, 2013; Malone & Ismail, 2020; Vega et al., 2018). As a result, these highlight the need for school psychology training programs to adopt a more integrated and applied approach to multicultural preparation to better equip future practitioners for the complexities of working with newcomer students.

There is a pressing need for school psychology training programs to embed applied, skill-based learning opportunities that reflect the realities of multicultural school settings. For example, training should include how to select linguistically and culturally appropriate tools, how to consult with EAL specialists, and how to interpret data within the broader context of

students' lived experiences (Cadime & Mendes, 2024; Vega et al., 2016). As emphasized by Aldalur et al. (2022), even the reporting of assessment results must be linguistically accessible to ensure that students and families can meaningfully engage with findings and recommendations.

Taken together, these findings showcase a need for the development of formal guidelines that clearly articulate best practices in psychoeducational assessment with newcomer students. These should be created in collaboration with psychologists, EAL specialists, and policymakers, and reflect ethical standards that prioritize equity and cultural responsiveness. Without such guidance, school psychologists may continue to face ambiguity in their practice and variability in how newcomer students are assessed and supported.

Opportunities for Professional Development and Consultation

Beyond graduate training, participants also reported limited access to professional development (PD) focused on supporting newcomer students. Whereas PD was available, it was often designed for classroom teachers and offered only general diversity content, rather than the clinical depth required for psychological service delivery. Participants described current offerings as reactive rather than preventative, often delivered in one-off workshop formats without opportunities for application, reflection, or follow-up. Several participants highlighted the inadequacy of generic diversity training, noting that it rarely addressed the practical challenges of adapting assessments, consulting across cultures, or working with interpreters.

This critique is reflected in the broader literature. Research shows that whereas diversity training is increasingly common in educational contexts, its effectiveness is limited when content is not tailored to specific professional roles or situated within ongoing, collaborative learning frameworks (Lopez & Bursztyn, 2013; Robinson-Zañartu et al., 2019). In the absence of sustained and discipline-specific PD, school psychologists often rely on informal consultation

and self-directed learning, approaches that may lead to inconsistent service quality and reinforce inequities across regions. Professional learning communities and ongoing case consultation have been identified as effective ways to develop culturally responsive practice in other jurisdictions (Jimerson et al., 2024), yet participants in this study described feeling professionally isolated when faced with newcomer-specific concerns.

The absence of clearly identified experts in this domain further exacerbated this sense of isolation. Participants reported difficulty identifying colleagues with expertise in culturally responsive assessment or intervention for newcomer populations, and several expressed frustrations with the lack of provincial leadership or infrastructure to support knowledge sharing. This lack of access to consultation is concerning in light of the ethical expectations outlined by the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA). Specifically, Principle II of the CPA Code of Ethics (2017) requires that psychologists work within the boundaries of their competence and consult with others who possess the necessary expertise when needed. Without clear avenues for consultation, school psychologists may be left to make high-stakes decisions in ethically ambiguous contexts without adequate support.

In response to these challenges, participants advocated for the development of provincial directories or networks that would allow school psychologists to connect with colleagues who have specialized knowledge in newcomer support. Such infrastructure could help address knowledge gaps, reduce duplication of effort, and foster more consistent practice across regions. Additionally, community-based organizations with experience in newcomer support (e.g., ISANS, YMCA, or other local cultural associations) should be consulted in the co-design and delivery of PD content. This would help ensure that training is grounded in the lived realities of newcomer families in Nova Scotia and that it incorporates local cultural, linguistic, and

settlement contexts. There is a need for system-level investment in not only content-specific training, but also the structures that support collaborative professional growth. As Nova Scotia's school population continues to diversify, the development of sustained, applied, and context-specific PD specifically geared toward school psychologists should be considered a priority for educational and professional associations alike.

Ethical Challenges and Complexities

Participants identified numerous ethical challenges in their work with newcomer students, including issues related to informed consent, confidentiality, misdiagnosis, and the use of interpreters. A primary concern involved the integrity of consent procedures. Several participants described cases in which consent forms were sent home, signed, and returned before any direct communication occurred with the family. These instances raised questions about whether consent was genuinely informed, particularly when parents may have limited English proficiency or unfamiliarity with psychological services. Even with the presence of interpreters or translated forms, participants expressed uncertainty about whether parents truly understood what they were agreeing to.

These concerns are reflected in the literature, which highlights how language barriers and cultural differences can obscure informed consent, especially when working with families unfamiliar with Western models of psychological assessment or diagnostic labelling (Cadime & Mendes, 2024; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Thomson et al., 2015). Moreover, informed consent is not merely a procedural formality; it requires collaborative, clear, and culturally appropriate dialogue. As the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA, 2017) emphasizes, respect for the dignity of persons includes ensuring that consent is voluntary, informed, and understood within the family's cultural and linguistic context. However, as Aldalur et al. (2022) point out, there

remains a disconnect between ethical codes and actual school practice, particularly when resources and time are constrained.

Participants also reported that interpreter use, though essential, introduced further ethical complexity. Psychologists described logistical issues, such as difficulty accessing trained interpreters, limited autonomy in booking interpreters, and last-minute cancellations. These challenges often left psychologists dependent on school staff (e.g., EAL teachers) to coordinate interpretation services, which can compromise confidentiality and reduce psychologists' control over ethical practices. Some participants shared that families declined professional interpretation, preferring to rely on informal translators such as children or extended relatives. Whereas this may reflect cultural norms or trust within community networks, it poses serious ethical risks. For example, child interpreters may be placed in developmentally inappropriate roles, leading to misunderstandings and emotional burden (Flores, 2005; Tingvold & Hauff, 2007). Although having family members or other support persons present is appropriate, it is clear that school psychologists must not rely on informal or untrained interpreters for clinical communication (NASP, 2023).

Concerns about interpreter qualifications were also common. There was expressed discomfort when interpreters were unfamiliar with psychological terms. This aligns with findings by Vega et al. (2016), who reported that over one-third of school psychologists had worked with poorly trained interpreters and often failed to document interpreter use in their reports, both of which undermine ethical assessment practices. Hernandez et al. (2024) further emphasized that most school psychology graduate students in the United States do not receive adequate training in working with interpreters, despite recommendations from national organizations such as NASP (2023) that interpreter collaboration be considered a critical skill in assessment.

Moreover, untrained interpreters may intentionally or unintentionally alter meaning, omit culturally significant information, or violate confidentiality, particularly in small communities where interpreters and families may know each other socially (Tribe & Lane, 2009; Hernandez et al., 2024). This is especially problematic in psychoeducational contexts, where decisions about diagnoses or eligibility for supports carry significant long-term implications. As Hernandez et al. (2024) note, the use of interpreters without appropriate briefing, supervision, and debriefing may lead to errors that invalidate assessment results and compromise students' rights to equitable services as a result.

The CPA Code of Ethics (CPA, 2017) requires that psychologists consult with professionals possessing relevant competencies when working outside their own scope. Participants in this study frequently articulated a desire for clearer provincial guidance and infrastructure, such as directories of qualified interpreters and experts in newcomer mental health. Without such systems in place, psychologists remain individually responsible for ethical practices they may not be structurally supported to uphold. This systemic gap is also reflected in Cadime and Mendes (2024), who call for institutional-level frameworks that go beyond individual effort, it requires clear, system-wide structures and support.

Overall, there is an urgent need for protocols that clarify psychologists' responsibilities when using interpreters, including required qualifications and ethical safeguards; the integration of formal training in both graduate and continuing education programs that offer hands-on experience with interpreters and diverse families (Hernandez et al., 2024); clear documentation practices for interpreter involvement in psychoeducational services (Vega et al., 2016); and perhaps policy guidance on informed consent procedures that uphold dignity, transparency, and mutual understanding in multilingual and multicultural contexts (CPA, 2017; 2023).

Implications for School Psychologists

The findings of this study suggest that school psychologists in Nova Scotia are navigating a tension between ethical commitment and structural constraint. Whereas many demonstrate dedication to equitable practice with newcomer students, their efforts are often hindered by limited formal training, inconsistent access to culturally appropriate tools, and the absence of clear guidance from the systems they work in. These realities highlight several implications for how the profession might evolve to meet the needs of increasingly diverse school populations.

To meet the needs of newcomer students, school psychologists must move beyond awareness-level understandings of culture and engage in applied, context-sensitive practice. Cultural competence and humility should be operationalized through concrete skills such as selecting linguistically appropriate tools, adapting interventions, and engaging in collaborative consultation with families and cultural brokers. Competence must be viewed as a dynamic process requiring reflective practice, exposure, and structured opportunities to work with diverse populations under supervision (Fisher, 2020; Reyna et al., 2017). Traditional standardized assessments may be poorly suited to the needs of newcomer students especially those with limited English proficiency or interrupted formal education. This suggests importance of developing greater fluency in alternative approaches, such as dynamic assessment, curriculum-based measures, and ecological observation. Dynamic assessment evaluates students' learning potential through mediated tasks and reduces linguistic and cultural bias by focusing on responsiveness rather than static performance (Poehner & Lantolf, 2005). School psychologists must be supported in acquiring the skills to implement these methods effectively and ethically, particularly in cases where conventional tools may yield misleading or invalid results (Cadime &

Mendes, 2024). Professional development and graduate training programs should embed these strategies as foundational, rather than optional, components of culturally responsive assessment.

Training in these areas must include coursework as well as supervised field placements involving newcomer students and guided debriefing around ethical, linguistic, and cultural considerations (Hernandez et al., 2024; Newell et al., 2010). In line with Newell et al. (2010) and recent student perspectives (Malone et al., 2025), applied psychology training programs should require at least one practicum that explicitly targets work with newcomer or dual-language learners, accompanied by competency-based supervision and structured reflection. Graduate programs should also undergo regular curriculum audits to ensure that multicultural content is systematically scaffolded, meaning that it is introduced at foundational levels and progressively reinforced through advanced coursework and supervised practicum (Gross & Malone, 2019; Zhang et al., 2024). Additionally, training providers and professional bodies should implement outcome monitoring to ensure that multicultural coursework and field experiences translate into measurable practitioner competence. For example, graduate programs could use pre- and post-course self-efficacy scales or structured reflective journals evaluated against established benchmarks (Vega et al., 2018).

Although psychoeducational assessment remains a primary task for many school psychologists, this study affirms the importance of consultation in newcomer student support. Participants reported a lack of organized opportunities for peer consultation and knowledge exchange specific to newcomer populations. Some noted difficulty identifying colleagues with experience in this area, particularly in rural regions. As such, professional organizations and educational authorities should invest in clinical infrastructure that facilitates collaboration, including regional directories of culturally competent practitioners, consultation forums, and

sustained partnerships with newcomer-serving organizations or community agencies. Peer support models such as inter-regional case consultation groups or virtual professional learning communities could offer space for psychologists to share adapted practices, troubleshoot ethical dilemmas, and discuss complex referrals (Jimerson et al., 2024). This is particularly crucial in rural and underserved areas, where psychologists may experience professional isolation and have fewer opportunities to consult with colleagues experienced in working with diverse populations.

School psychologists are often placed in ethically complex situations without adequate policy guidance, particularly regarding informed consent, interpreter use, and diagnostic decisions. These challenges call for the profession to embrace its role not only as a provider of services, but as an advocate for system-level change. Psychologists must take active roles in policy development, staff training, and resource planning to ensure that schools are equipped to support the full diversity of their student populations. Local guidelines are especially important in a province like Nova Scotia where newcomer students are increasingly enrolling in both urban and rural school settings with uneven access to supports. Guidelines could include structured interpreter briefing procedures, translated report templates, and plain language videos to support truly informed consent (see Aldalur et al., 2022; Thomson et al., 2015).

Ethical leadership requires more than adherence to individual principles, it requires collective action to address institutional gaps and structural inequities (CPA, 2017; Chan et al., 2025). One-off diversity workshops are insufficient to meet the complex demands of school psychology practice in multilingual, multicultural settings, and the current findings reinforce the need for sustained experiential learning that is directly tied to the realities of practice. Professional development should include case-based learning, supervision in culturally diverse contexts, and co-designed training with community organizations that serve newcomers. For

example, partnerships, such as with the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) or local associations, can offer psychologists valuable insights into different experiences and potential barriers facing students and families (see Crooks et al., 2020; Kalchos et al., 2022). Such organizations can also act as consultation points for understanding settlement processes, family dynamics, and cultural norms. Joint initiatives such as co-developed welcome materials, case debriefings, or adapted forms could help better align school-based practice with community needs.

School psychologists should be empowered to engage in critical inquiry about their practices, reflect on their positionality, and build the practical competencies needed to support newcomer students with accuracy, empathy, and effectiveness. This includes using strengths-based approaches in consultation and assessment reporting such as documenting multilingualism, perseverance, and adaptability as protective factors, and framing recommendations with a focus on student assets rather than deficits. Smith et al., (2023) further demonstrate that newcomer youth themselves emphasise resilience, peer support, and self-advocacy as important resources, which highlights the importance of intentionally cultivating these strengths within school-based programming. In parallel, school psychologists have an important role in helping reframe school narratives with newcomer students by advocating for programming that recognizes and supports resilience (Gagné et al., 2021; Robinson-Zañartu et al., 2019; Shakya et al., 2012).

In sum, the findings of this study suggest that supporting newcomer students is not a specialized area within school psychology but rather it is increasingly a core aspect of ethical and competent practice. It requires a shift in how the profession defines competence, allocates its time, and engages with systems. School psychologists are uniquely positioned to lead this

transformation, but doing so will require coordinated efforts at the level of training programs, professional associations, and provincial policy.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study offers important insights into how school psychologists in Nova Scotia understand and approach their work with newcomer students. However, several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, although qualitative description provides practice-oriented data, it is not designed to produce generalizable results. The perspectives shared by participants reflect their specific regional, institutional, and professional contexts and may not be representative of all school psychologists in Nova Scotia or across Canada. Future studies might consider larger samples across multiple provinces or incorporate mixed methods designs to expand the generalizability of findings.

Second, all nine participants in this study self-identified as female. Future research should seek to include a more gender-diverse participant pool and examine how intersecting identities (e.g., cultural background, language proficiency, professional training location) shape psychologists' practices with newcomer students. Additionally, none of the participants considered themselves to be bilingual in the professional context or able to provide assessment services in another language, which may be reflective of the availability of multilingual psychologists in Nova Scotia. Other regions of Canada may have more multilingual school psychologists; however, further research is needed to document this. Given the different linguistic backgrounds of many newcomer families, research that includes linguistically diverse or bilingual school psychologists could provide important comparative or complementary perspectives.

A third limitation involves the reliance on self-report data. Although interviews offered valuable firsthand accounts, they may be subject to social desirability bias or incomplete recall. One-time interviews may not have provided sufficient time to build the trust needed for participants to fully articulate difficulty or uncertain aspects of their practice. Participants may have forgotten to share certain experiences or hesitated to disclose areas of discomfort, particularly if there was no established relationship with the interviewer. Future research might benefit from a more longitudinal approach involving multiple check-ins over a school year or years, ideally led by researchers with shared professional backgrounds, to help built rapport and allow time for reflection. Combining interview data with other methods such as observations, case reviews or document (e.g., reports) analyses to better understand how school psychologists' values align with actual practices.

Finally, this study did not include the voices of newcomer students or families, which are essential for a comprehensive understanding of school psychology practice in this area. The focus on school psychologists' experiences was intentional in order to highlight knowledge and experience gaps; however, future studies should incorporate the perspectives of newcomer students and their caregivers to better understand how services are received, perceived, and experienced. Participatory or community-based approaches may be especially useful in generating culturally responsive recommendations for practice and policy. In doing so, the field may begin to close the gap between ethical commitment and systemic capacity and move toward a model of school psychology that is inclusive and responsive to Canada's evolving demographic landscape.

Conclusion

As Nova Scotia's schools become increasingly diverse, school psychologists are both challenged and called to respond in ways that honour students' language and culture. The findings of this study suggest that even though individual psychologists demonstrate a high level of ethical commitment and a willingness to learn, systemic limitations in training, professional development, and resources constrain their capacity to provide equitable support. Addressing these gaps requires not only enhancing individual competence but also changing the educational and professional systems in which school psychologists operate. Culturally responsive and linguistically inclusive practice must become standard rather than exceptional in the delivery of psychological services to newcomer students.

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Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Self-Identified Gender	Language(s) Spoken	Practice Setting	Community	Highest Degree	Years of Practice in Schools
1	Woman	English	RCE	Rural	Master's	1.5
2	Woman	English	RCE	Rural	Master's	5
3	Woman	English/Arabic	RCE	Urban	Master's	3
4	Woman	English	RCE/PP	Urban	Master's	3
5	Woman	English	RCE	Rural	Master's	24
6	Woman	English	RCE/PP	Urban	Master's	10
7	Woman	English	RCE	Rural	Master's	22
8	Woman	English	RCE/PP	Rural	Master's	19 (27 in total)
9	Woman	English	RCE	Rural	Master's	18

Note. RCE = Regional Centre for Education; PP = Private Practice

Appendix A

Interview Guide for School Psychologists

Background

1. Do you currently work as a school psychologist in Nova Scotia?

- Probe: where are you employed (an RCE, private practice)? If private practice, when did you last work for a public school?

2. How long have you been practicing as a school psychologist in NS?

Referral Process

3. How often do you get a referral for an EAL/newcomer student?
4. Who typically refers EAL/newcomer students to you?

- Probe: does this process differ depending on school/school team?

5. Can you give some examples of times you have worked with EAL/newcomer students?

- Probe: what types of strengths and difficulties did the students have? What was/were the referral question(s)?

Knowledge of EAL/Newcomer Programming/Support

6. What training have you received with respect to working with EAL/newcomer students during your graduate school studies?

- Probe: did you attend graduate school in Nova Scotia or out of province?

7. Other than your graduate school training, have you received any other training or supervision related to working with EAL/newcomer students?

- Probe: where/how did you receive this training? Was it supported by your employer?

8. What is your knowledge of EAL programming and/or support in public schools?

Experience of EAL/Newcomer Programming/Support

9. To what extent have you been involved in decision-making about programming (e.g., adaptations, IPP) for EAL students?
10. What are some of the services you have provided to EAL/newcomer students (e.g., psych-eds, behaviour plans, consultation)?

- Probe: did you feel competent providing those services? Why or why not?

11. If you have identified an EAL/newcomer student as having an LD, what types of supports did that student receive?

- Probe: to what extent were you consulted about implementation of supports?
- Probe: to what extent were parents involved in the process?
- Probe: were parents provided with interpreters and/or translated materials to help them understand the LD?

Challenges in Supporting EAL/Newcomer Students

12. What are some of the challenges or ethical dilemmas you often encounter when working with EAL/newcomer students and their families?
- Probe: do you find these barriers affect your ability to provide evidence-based interventions?
- Probe: do you consult with anyone regarding these cases?
13. How prepared do you feel to address the needs of newcomer students, and what areas do you feel need improvement?
14. Are there specific strategies that you have found effective in supporting newcomer students?
15. How did admin support you or not in working with EAL/newcomer students suspected of having an LD?
- Probe: was a referral to school psychology deemed necessary by admin?
16. Is there anything you need to better support EAL/newcomer students (e.g., training, materials, support)?
17. What do you enjoy most about working with these students and families?

Appendix B

Demographics Questionnaire

1. What is your self-identified gender?

_____

- ☐ Prefer not to say

3. What is your primary language?

- ☐ English
- ☐ French
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

4. Do you speak any other languages fluently?

- ☐ Yes (please specify): _____
- ☐ No

2. What is your current employment setting?

- ☐ A regional center for education in Nova Scotia
- ☐ Private Practice*
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

*If you are currently working in private practice, have you ever worked in a public school in NS?

- ☐ Yes; how recently? _____
- ☐ No

5. What type of community do you practice in?

- ☐ Urban
- ☐ Rural
- ☐ Both

6. What is your highest level of education?

- ☐ Master's degree
- ☐ Doctoral degree (Ph.D., Psy.D.)
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Appendix C

Email Message for Recruitment

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS NEEDED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY!

A graduate student in the School Psychology program at Mount Saint Vincent University is conducting a study about the knowledge and experiences of school psychologists in supporting newcomer students, particularly those who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL), in Nova Scotia schools. We are recruiting school psychologists across the province.

If you are interested in participating in the study, you would be asked to take part in an online interview about your experiences working with newcomer students. The interview will take approximately one hour and can be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you. You will be compensated for your time.

If you would like to participate, please contact Yara Yazbek at yara.yazbek@msvu.ca and she will be in touch to provide you with more information about the study.

Appendix D

Information and Consent Form

Information and Consent Form for Participants

Study Title: A Qualitative Examination of School Psychologists' Knowledge of and Experiences with Supporting Newcomer Students in Nova Scotia Schools.

Principal Investigator: Yara Yazbek, BA
Graduate Student in School Psychology
Mount Saint Vincent University
Email: yara.yazbek@msvu.ca

Supervisor: Sara King, PhD, RPsych
Professor
Faculty of Education
Mount Saint Vincent University

Committee Members: Christine Doe, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Education
Mount Saint Vincent University

Krista Ritchie, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Education
Mount Saint Vincent University

Introduction
You have been invited to take part in a research study. This form gives you information about the study. Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important that you understand the purpose of this study. Taking part in this study is voluntary (your choice). Informed consent starts with the initial contact about the study and continues until the end of the study. If you have any questions or concerns that this form does not answer, the principal investigator will be happy to give you further information. **You do not have to take part in this study, and you may withdraw from this study at any time with no consequences**.

The ethical components of this research study have been reviewed by the University Research Ethics Board and found to be in compliance with Mount Saint Vincent University's Research Ethics Policy.

Purpose of the Study
This study is being conducted at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). The purpose of this study is to interview school psychologists in Nova Scotia about their self-reported knowledge and experiences in supporting newcomer students, particularly those who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL). By gathering qualitative data from school psychologists, this study will provide insight into their self-described experiences in supporting newcomer students in Nova Scotia schools. Findings could help inform the development of culturally responsive interventions and training opportunities to help school psychologists better support newcomer students in Nova Scotia.

Study Design
If you wish to participate in the study, you will first complete a brief demographics form, which will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. The form will ask you about your background information, such as language(s) spoken, current employment setting, and education.

You will then take part in an individual online interview during which you will be asked to provide details about your experiences and knowledge related to the referral process, EAL/ programming support, and challenges when working with newcomer students. The interview will be conducted using Microsoft Teams and will be recorded to facilitate later transcription. The recording will be stored in a secure folder on the MSVU OneDrive and will be deleted following transcription.

All your information will be kept confidential. You will be assigned an ID number prior to completing the demographics form and this will also be linked to your interview, meaning that there will be no way for anyone to identify you. Although we have a master spreadsheet linking ID numbers to names, this is solely for the purposes of participant withdrawal and will only be accessible to the Principal Investigator.

Potential Harm
We do not foresee any risks or harm for you in taking part in this study. You may feel frustration or emotional discomfort when discussing issues related to your past experiences when working with newcomer or EAL students, but the risk associated with this discussion is likely no more than would be expected in your everyday life as a practicing psychologist. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable.

If any issues arise as a result of your participation in this study, you are encouraged to contact the Principal Investigator, Yara Yazbek at yara.yazbek@msvu.ca or her thesis supervisor, Dr. Sara King at sara.king@msvu.ca or 902.457.6552.

Potential Benefit
There are no direct benefits to taking part in this study. However, what you tell us may help us better understand any potential gaps in cultural competency training for school psychologists, which could help inform future professional development opportunities in school psychology.

Alternatives to Study
Participation in this study is completely voluntary (your choice). You do not have to take part in this study.

Withdrawal from Study
You may decide to withdraw from this study at any time up until two weeks after your interview. There are no risks involved with withdrawing from this study. The reason you may not withdraw after two weeks is that we will be combining all participant data at this point, and it will not be possible to identify your specific data. Should you decide to withdraw from the study before data are analyzed, all your data will be discarded and not used in the study. **We estimate that data analysis will start about two weeks following your interview; therefore, if you wish to withdraw *after* your interview, please contact the researcher within two weeks of completion.**

Your employment status will not be affected by your decision to withdraw from this study. If the study is changed in any way that could affect your decision to continue, you will be told about the changes, and you may be asked to sign a new consent form.

Costs and Reimbursements
It will not cost you anything to take part in this study. To thank you for your time, you will be sent a $25 Staples gift card. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you will still receive the gift card.

Confidentiality
Your confidentiality (privacy) will be protected throughout the study and after the study is complete. You will not be named in any reports or publications based on this research. Only an ID number will be used on the questionnaire and interview you complete. None of your colleagues will know whether you decide to participate in the study. Your responses will be password protected and encrypted to ensure privacy. Only researchers immediately involved in the research will have access to the information you give us.

A master list linking your ID number and contact information will be kept for the purpose of tracking gift card distribution, participant withdrawal, and may need to be provided to university Financial Services in the event of an audit by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA). Only the researcher will have access to this master list. Additionally, all studies conducted at Mount Saint Vincent University are subject to a potential audit by the Mount Saint Vincent University Research Ethics Board. Should an audit be conducted, your privacy will continue to be protected to the maximum extent of the law. If the results of the study are published in a scientific journal, the publication will not contain any identifiable information.

Although we will protect your confidentiality throughout the study, the researchers are bound by the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists and by the law and have a duty to report certain kinds of information. If, during your interview, you disclose **(1) harm or imminent harm to a child or vulnerable adult or (2) that you intend to harm another person**, we have a responsibility to report this to the relevant authorities.

Research Rights
By signing below, you show that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate in the study. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigator(s) or involved institution from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study up to two weeks after your interview without consequence.

If you have questions about research in general or this particular research study, at any time during or after your participation, please contact the Principal Investigator, Yara Yazbek at yara.yazbek@msvu.ca or her thesis supervisor, Dr. Sara King at sara.king@msvu.ca or 902.457.6552.

If you have questions about how this study is being conducted and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved in the study, you may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) at 457-6350 or via e-mail at ethics@msvu.ca.

Consent

I have read this information and consent form and have had the chance to ask questions which have been answered to my satisfaction before signing my name. I understand the nature of the study and I understand the potential risks. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study up to two weeks after my interview without consequence. **I freely agree to participate in this research study and to my interview being recorded.** My consent is indicated by my signature below.

Signature

_____ _____

Name (please print) Signature

_____

Date

- ☐ I agree to my interview being audio and video recorded
- ☐ I agree to my interview being audio recorded only

_____ _____

Name of person obtaining consent (please print) Signature

_____

Date